

GLIMPSES OF VILLAGE LIFE  
IN  
NORTHERN INDIA

BY

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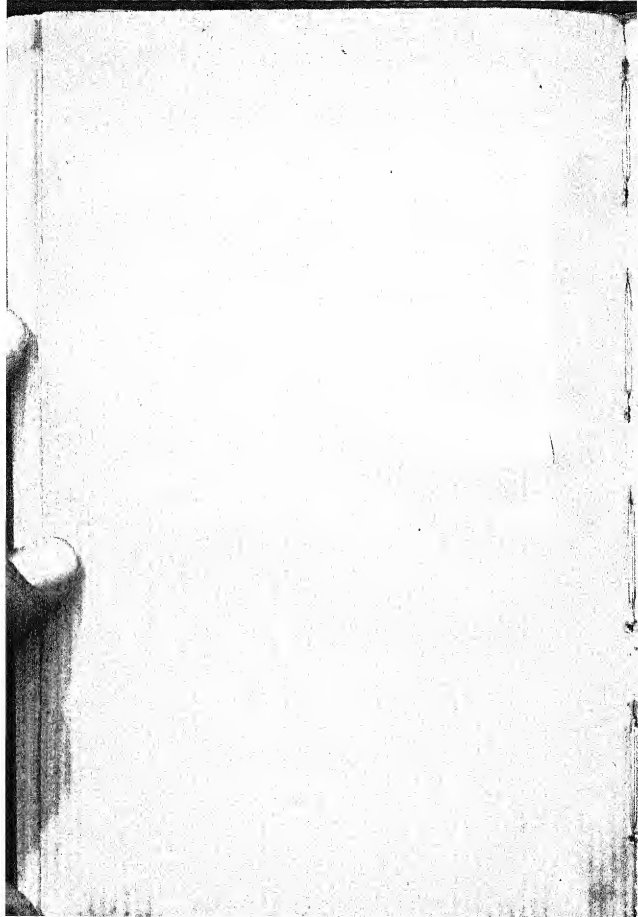
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To  
HIS EXCELLENCY  
Sir William Sinclair Harris,  
K.C.S.I., K.C.I.E.,  
*Governor of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh.*  
This little book  
is  
by permission  
GRATEFULLY DEDICATED  
as a humble token of genuine admiration  
for his valuable contributions  
to literature.





## PREFACE.

I had a mind to write the following essays in my mother-tongue; but I afterwards changed my mind because that would have been setting before the public a familiar dish dressed in familiar style. I was, therefore, advised to adopt the vehicle of English in order to make the facts described accessible to such non-Indian readers as may wish to gain a deeper insight into the village life of this country.

Being a countryman by birth and breeding I hope I can claim first-hand knowledge of the things I have attempted to describe and to create interest in. For nothing is more characteristic of the educated classes in India than a certain ignorance of village life in all its aspects. My chief aim in these pages is to change this ignorance to knowledge and sympathy.

The speech delivered by His Excellency the Governor at the Oudh Provincial Darbar held at Lucknow in November 1925 acted as a stimulus and as a source of inspiration. But when the announcement regarding the appointment of a Royal Commission on Agriculture was made I thought that the hour for the publication of my book had arrived. The work that was begun some

#### PREFACE.

three years ago, was now pushed on vigorously. Before this it proceeded at a leisurely pace with many interruptions and impediments.

Most of these essays have appeared in the press, at intervals long or short according to the circumstances attending the production of each; and I take this opportunity of thanking the editors of the *Leader* and *The Indian Daily Telegraph* for their courtesy in accepting my contributions.

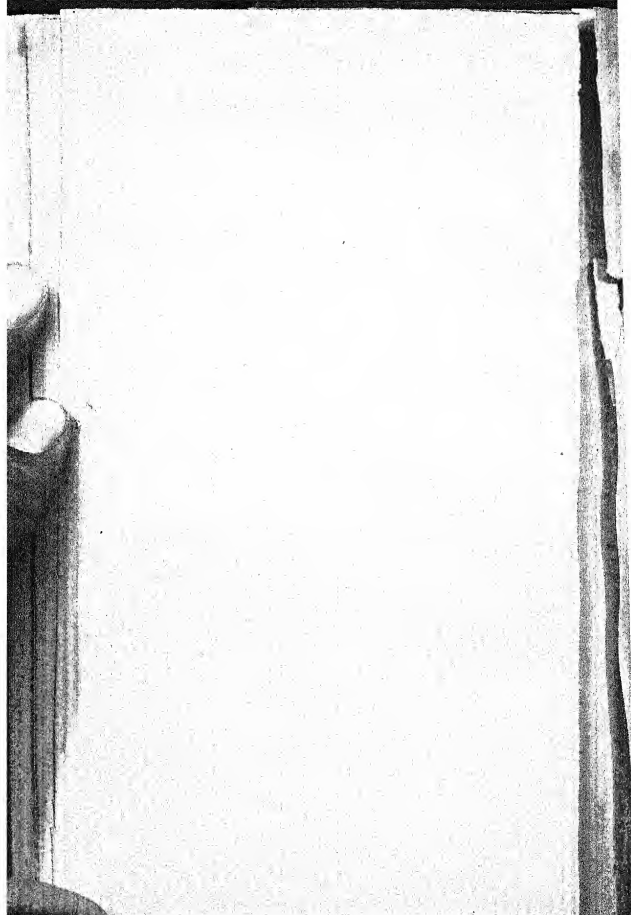
The keen interest evinced by His Excellency the Viceroy and no less by His Excellency the Governor of the United Provinces in the well-being of the village population and in the progress and development of agriculture, which is the national industry of India, is bound to bear fruit in a greater degree of general prosperity and happiness and in a greater measure of active sympathy and appreciation for the simple, peaceful and virtuous character of village life in India. And if the present little volume, with all its imperfections, contributes to add to this sympathy and appreciation by ever so little it will have achieved its end.

R. S.

NAINI TAL  
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## I.—MORNING.

It is an established custom to call the Spring the King of seasons. During this part of the year the climate is temperate, relieved equally from the cutting cold of winter and the burning heat of summer. If you go out for a stroll in the morning before the break of day, you find Nature appearing in her best charms, and displaying them at their best advantage. The atmosphere is calm, clear and serene, the vernal breeze refreshing and rejuvenating, the verdancy of new leaves charming and fascinating, the scent of wild flowers and mango blossoms exhilarating and intoxicating, and the frequent melodious notes of the "Papiha" thrilling. Nothing is wanting to make the scene impressive and perfect. The prevailing peace comforts the head and soothes the heart. The fields rich and radiant with the ready harvest flatter hope and dissipate disappointment. All gloomy thoughts glide away and for the daily battle of life you return home equipped with fresh armour. As the dawn approaches, the twittering of birds on their lofty perch grows fonder. Some of them hop about from one branch to another. Some flutter down to the fields and peck at grains of corn to feed their young ones. These natural and simple sights never fail to provide the mind with happy reflections.

By and by the faint light of dawn broadens into full day, and everything appears bathed in golden hues. The glory is Nature's own. Tiny drops of

dew still tremble on the blades of grass and trees and sparkle like gems in the bright light of the sun. The higher the sun ascends the more active and alert become the people. They are out in the fields and engage themselves zealously in their work. Who would think from watching them that the hearts of these honest folks are consumed with anxiety and the worst of all care, the care for bread? Before the day is far advanced the drove of cows and she-buffaloes is seen going out to pasture, tended each by a village urchin who takes a mischievous pleasure in belabouring them. Pell-mell run the animals, and if any one of them happens to stray into some one else's field, the owner beats the offending animal mercilessly, and showers curses and abuses on the herdsman and all his family, including his deceased ancestors. But no notice is taken of such imprecations: they are always on the lips of these people. As the day advances the daily life of the people comes into full swing.

## II.—NOONDAY.

In summer Nature wears a fierce aspect. The heat, the dust, the glare are each intolerable. During the day a hot wind blows clouds of dust, which hang in the sky during the calm night, making the atmosphere too thick for easy breathing. This hot wind is called the *Loo*. Even in the early morning the temperature is often higher than that of the human blood normally. By ten o'clock the sun becomes blazing and seems to rain fire, but similes only serve to weaken the impression and to spoil the picture.

The hot wind blows in hard gusts, with which the exhaust of a furnace compares but poorly, because in the case of the *Loo* there is no escape, and no protection. It is all-pervading, all-powerful, penetrating the bare hut and the fortified castle alike. It blinds the wayfarer and completely obscures the vision of his already dazzled eyes. If it happens to be of great velocity it is followed by disastrous consequences. Sometimes it drives small children and cattle out of their course and plunges them into a well. It sometimes causes sudden sunstrokes, and smites the unsuspecting traveller down on the ground a dead man.

The hot sun shines overhead; the earth cracks under foot; the surrounding scene appears quivering; distant objects seem to dance up and down, as if in restlessness. The shimmering of the thin and translucent air is often mistaken for a stream

by animals, who rush ahead in hopes of finding water and perish in the heat and the strain.

In such a brutal weather only peasants and petty traders with their pack ponies dare leave home. The former are obliged to do their agricultural work, such as manuring their fields or watering their sugar-cane crop, and the latter must bend their steps to some market to avoid starvation. The ponies crushed by the burdens dried by thirst and parched by the heat stumble at every step, and are mercilessly whipped by their heartless owners, who constantly urge them on to accomplish the journey as speedily as possible. There is no bustle and activity in evidence anywhere and the silence and solitude is oppressive. The wind alone makes a rumbling and whistling noise when passing through the top of the trees, but the sound is more like moaning than of busy life. The whole country looks deserted. In every direction a wave of white heat seems to be inundating everything. There is truth in the saying which people use about such weather, that the weather is so hot that shade takes its shelter in a well.

The wayfarers in their loneliness are often waylaid by robbers. However loudly they may scream there is no one to listen, no one within hearing to help.



### III.—EVENING.

Nature is at her best when she displays her charms in the evening, specially during the rains. A glorious sunset will make one feel around one's self a transfiguration of the world and all that is therein. In town the setting sun is not significant of any real pleasure, and is only a sign for dyspeptics and diabetics to go out for a constitutional walk on crowded roads, to breathe the impure air, and to be jostled by *ekkas*, bicycles and other vehicles. But in the country places the sunset is an object of positive ecstasy. There is not the remotest chance of one's peaceful walk being disturbed or diverted out of its aimed or aimless course. There one is not startled by the thick-throated horns of motors, nor spattered by the wheels of passing vehicles. Nor are you harshly rebuked by horsemen or riders in cars for walking in the middle of a road, nor have you to suffer the humiliation of a poor pedestrian who encounters a friend driving in a carriage.

The serenity and the peace of the place forces upon one something of its own tranquillity, and one is perfectly free to roam about wherever one's fancy and inclination may lead in the healthiest atmosphere and the most unbroken silence.

If you come across anybody in a village you are at once so struck with his childlike simplicity, sincerity, openness and frankness that you are ashamed to show your own superiority. It is only in a village that you see humanity unalloyed

by convention. The country life has an educative value of its own. Rural areas have an old-world air about them, quite free from the absurdities, artificialities and complexities of modern life. There everything is what Nature made it, unaltered by the hand of man. Fields rich with harvest situated amidst natural surroundings, cast a spell, the potent influence of which sublimates all the emotions of a man's heart, soothes his sorrows and clears his thoughts. Only in such a place can the jars and jolts of the mind be avoided.

The setting sun is a splendid object for contemplation. Its loveliness captures the heart and enraptures the senses. It appears like a big ball of fire slowly rolling down on the green tops of tall trees, surrounded by drifting clouds which go on assuming different shapes in a quick succession, tinged with the soft rays of the setting sun. The scene is entertaining beyond description.

One is moved with sympathy with the whole visible universe, and recognises the spirit of God in its wonderful order and design.

The reiterated splashing of water in the quiet lakes caused by the feet of the cattle returning from the pasture, the rustling sighs of the wind among the trees which seem to embrace each other and to whisper the message of universal love, animate our soul. The soft hues of the setting sun begin to deepen into twilight which, in its turn, struggles with the dusk, and finally a wave of darkness inundates the whole place, and everything is wrapped in gloom. Fire-flies on trees emit tiny and twinkling sparks of light and make one think of fairyland.

#### IV.—THE EVENING RESORT OF VILLAGE FOLK.

After a long day's hard labour when the poor peasants, wearied and worn out with toil, return home in the evening they are more dead than alive. But there is no rest awaiting them here. They have to attend to their household work which has its burden too. When that is finished they appease their hunger with the meanest and coarsest fare. Now with their *hookah* and *chillum* they repair to the meeting place of the village to spend their leisure in discussing local topics. In several open places in the village the poor people pile up heaps of refuse (called *alan* or *koora*) and set fire to them. Around the fire the people sit down, each on a brick laid flat or on a lump of straw spread like a cushion.

The flames soon die out, and as night advances and the wind blows in cold gusts, the poor peasants shiver and gather more close round the fire. A thin cotton quilt, which is soon damped with the profusely falling dew, is all that they wrap round their bodies, and this feeble covering affords but little protection from the bitter cold without the supplementary aid of the fire, which is therefore kept up by fresh supplies of dry leaves raked up from the neighbourhood. These evening meetings by the fire are the daily resort of the aged, the gouty and the otherwise disabled people of the village. At their approach the young people slip away. Curious are the discussions that take place

there; the strangest beliefs are expressed, and the wildest stories told. Idle gossips, babblers, story-tellers, tale-bearers, scandal-mongers, back-biters, false reporters and all kinds of talents are duly represented. At first the conversation centres round agricultural topics. Some person's fields are admired for the standing crops, merely for the sake of courtesy or to carry on the thread of discourse, and the man holds his head high and casts a proud look round on the audience, and as a matter of formality more than of sincerity thanks Providence, and then proceeds to give an account of how his sagacity and industry contributed to the result. After that the recent matrimonial alliances of the village and the vicinity come under discussion. Before the subject is exhausted the domestic affairs of well-to-do neighbours crop up for envious remarks or unfavourable comments. The more the scandal one can talk in a low tone, the more entertaining and courteous is one regarded as being by the assembly. If a death has lately occurred in the village it provides almost an endless theme to speak upon. All the virtues and weaknesses of the dead are raked up by memory, and mole-hills are magnified into mountains. Social, religious, political matters likewise come up for discussion, and everybody gets a chance to have his say. Not often it happens that differences arise and the tone of the meeting becomes rasping and querulous and sometimes the talk leads to graver consequences.

As the night advances the gathering becomes thinner and thinner. After nine o'clock the last pull at the *hookah* is taken, and the people

betake themselves to their bed and compose themselves to sleep. Sleep does not take long to come, but it is of such a short duration that before the sleepers are fully refreshed and equipped for next day's hard labour they are wide awake again. In the last part of the night when the weather becomes chilly neither the heap of straw which is their bed nor the cotton quilt which is their covering is able to shield them from the severity of the cold. They are obliged to start up from bed, light a fire, and sit before it to warm themselves. They sit so close to the fire that the skin of their legs becomes tanned and brown. The *hookah* provides internal warmth. Before the break of day they leave the fireside and go to their work. Their place round the fire is immediately taken by the women of the house. When their gossiping tongue is let loose both heaven and earth are moved. The gist of their conversation is generally the undying grudge which they cherish towards their daughters-in-law, who are heartily abused and unsparingly cursed. If she happens to be a widow she is held responsible for the death of her husband and is spoken of most insultingly and contemptibly.

The old women, after day-break, bring out the young ones and feed them on food kept overnight. The poor urchins, dragged from sleep, sneeze vehemently in the cold air and chatter their teeth until food warms them up. When the sun rises high the fireside is deserted.

## V.—MOON-LIT NIGHTS.

The moon has provided an inexhaustible source of inspiration to Hindi poets to pour out the deepest feelings of the heart. There is nothing in the whole realm of poetry to surpass the fervour of emotion which finds expression in their poems; nothing soothes the fancy and lulls the love-stricken heart with greater power.

To some poets the moon appears as an engine of torment to those who pine in separation and solitude, driven by distance and the stress of circumstances to lose sight of the beloved one; by others the moon is condemned and cursed for mocking at the lover's desolation; and by others the moon is implored and entreated not to rise again and so renew their agonies. Further, Rahu, the fabled demon who is supposed to swallow the sun and moon and to cause eclipses, is pitifully invoked to digest the moon instead of disgorging her out, as he does at the termination of the eclipse.

Special importance is attached to the full moon of October. On this night it is religiously believed that Krishna held a great dance with the Gopikas or milkmaids of Brindaban. So this night has come to be observed as a festival. It is also believed that on this night gods rain down the elixir of life. People put a plate of rice in the open air, and the next morning they cook it in milk and

eat it, the first thing, in the simple faith of attaining immortality.

But apart from all this poetry, fable and superstition, moon-lit nights are in themselves peculiarly lovely in the country places. After dusk, when twilight begins to deepen into darkness, the soft silvery beams of a newly-risen moon seem to struggle to drive away the dark forces of the night, which for a time hold their own against the advancing array. This battle goes on, and at last the dark masses of the night are thinned and scattered and take to flight, closely chased by the beams of the conquering moon. The higher the moon ascends the brighter it becomes, till at midnight it seems to have whitewashed the earth, and everything looks spotlessly chaste and transparently clean and pure, because the country air in autumn is absolutely free from dust and smoke. Every visible object is bathed in a milky white light and every nook and corner filled with the lunar luminance. The white fields, the winding lanes, unaltered by the hands of man, the sandy beach of the river, all combine to make the scene perfect and impressive.

The flowers thrown into the river, mounted on gentle waves inspired by the cool and refreshing breeze, play with the vibrating splendour of the moon mirrored and reflected on the glassy surface of the clear water. The sighing of the wind when it passes through grown-up sugar-cane fields is musical in tone and soothing in its message. It seems to be the very romance of life. The sweet

scent of wild flowers, bathed in dew, spreads far and wide, and intoxicates the senses. The whole place appears to sleep comfortably under a spell, and the profound silence seems to have been blessed with thousands of tongues, the secret message of which is a food for the soul.

But what words can really portray such a perfect scene?



## VI.—SPRING.

The spring season is the most important harvest season in Northern India. When the crops after facing many dangers of being destroyed begin at last to ripen, the village people feel as if they had a new lease of life. Their faded faces glow with hope. Long before the proper time comes for estimating the value of their standing crops, they indulge in speculation over this. Each succeeding estimate excels the one before, until the value is grossly overestimated. Inordinate hopes reanimate their spirit and raise their ambitions. They cheer up and the look of dejection and depression departs.

To give a vivid portraiture of the fields radiant and resplendent with rich harvest is entirely beyond the power and province of words. It is simply a heavenly sight. Whatever may be said will fall far short of the reality. Gold-coloured carpets seem to have been spread on the field as though for hope and contentment to rest on. The scene appears magical in magnificence, imposing in grandeur, enchanting in effect, but quite free from absurd artificialities. So as to leave nothing to be desired to make the scenery as charming as possible, the trees shake off their dead dry leaves and put on their new emerald green garb, and to crown all, when the mango trees blossom, the scent that pervades the whole place is so ravishing, so natural, so fragrant and so refreshing that all the extracts of exotic flowers appear as worthless imitations.

The silence and solitude, which are the distinguishing features of the country side, seem actually to speak, and to speak so eloquently that one is enchanted, thrown into a rapt reverie, finding oneself floating and drifting with a current of beatific visions until one's thoughts are submerged in the limitless.

When the time of cutting the crops comes, the peasants apply themselves to the task with that "entire devotion" which "scorneth nicer hands." They labour from sunrise to sunset unremittingly. When overpowered by thirst they turn to some neighbouring tank and hastily gulp down two or three "handfuls" of dirty water and come back to their fields to resume their work. Without allowing themselves the least breathing time they return to their toil with untiring and never-decreasing energy. Towards the close of the day they gather and bundle the harvest, and carry it on their head to the place where it is stocked. Under the crushing burden they bear, they plod their weary way with heavy steps, humming a merry tune which, to a certain extent, sweetens the sourness of a livelong day's labour. When this work is finished they hasten to their wretched hovels, which are only an apology for a home, and with perfect relish and appetite take whatever food they find ready, and at the conclusion drink off a goodly jug of water.

At this season of the year the poorest of the poor have something to live upon. They pick up grains from the fields the harvest of which has been cut. They work their fingers to the bone. A share is claimed by the owner of the fields even

in grains so painfully picked up. After this they fill their pipe and form themselves into groups and knots. They first indulge in a sort of general conversation, and then in local gossip; and then they discuss the affairs of neighbouring villages with pedantic shakings of the head, twistings of moustaches and combings of beards with fingers. When the company begins to feel drowsy the meeting comes to a close, the final utterance being praises of the past, curses on the present and gloomy prognostications of the future. After they disperse they hurriedly repair to the place where the harvest is stocked. In the first part of the night they snatch a few winks of sleep, but after that they remain broad awake to keep watch over the bundles of the gathered harvest. When all the crops are cut the work of threshing and winnowing begins which is by no means less laborious.

When all this process is finished a huge heap of grain is gathered, the sight of which fills the peasants with inexpressible joy and a tinge of pride brightens their woebegotten faces. Now the children importune their parents for sweets, the women urge their claim for trinkets, the aged press for the expenses of a pilgrimage and others for other equally urgent demands. Some of these claimants they cajole and coax into silence, some they put off with promises, some with rebuffs, and some with significant references to the rule of high prices. It is not their way to grudge any legitimate expense, but to them the boundaries of the legitimate are easily and quickly obliterated.

First the village carpenters and blacksmiths are paid their year's dues for repairs done to their

carts and ploughs. Then, strangely enough, comes the turn of the local professional poet. He is really but a rude rhymers, stringing together harsh words and unmelodious sounds, with the roughest mechanical art, but yet he is listened to by the village folk, who contribute to provide him with a living. Then come the dues of the landlord, and the clearing off of the account of the local "Shylock;" and it is then that the crisis comes. Their fancied fabric of hope dissolves in a breath. They find that the sum to which they stand in his debt in his account books is far in excess of the highest estimate they had made of the value of their crops. The entire stock of grain they had heaped up and deemed to be their own, is pawned, seized, or sold, and so the struggle for the daily bread begins again.

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## VII.—SUMMER.

The hot weather is no time of leisure in the country tracts, in spite of the scorching heat of a sullenly shining sun, the very first peep of which drives away the freshness of the balmy breeze of the fragrant morning. The flowers begin to fade and the creepers wither.

As soon as the work of reaping and gathering the spring crops is finished, the peasants first turn their attention to their sugar-cane plantations. The young plants begin to shoot up by this time, and the first care is to cover them with stalks lest the fierce heat should stunt their growth and eventually dry them up. The next labour is the watering of these fields, which is a very troublesome task in the oppressive weather. The water is drawn up from the well in leather buckets by gangs of men walking up and down. Before it reaches the field much of it has soaked into the sun-baked earth, and not a little has evaporated; it is only the remnant of a thin stream that dribbles into the field. Until the passage is well watered and saturated the flow is not free. Although the work of drawing water is done under a covering, the relief which the sparse and thin thatching affords the labourers is but nominal. The men work bare-bodied, bare-headed and bare-footed. The scorching sun beats upon their head and the earth cracks under their feet. The grains of sand reflect the bright and blinding light of the fire-

raining sun, and glare like sparks of hell and dazzle the eyes. The hot wind, like a breath from a steam boiler, comes in hard gusts and raises a cloud of dust, which makes it hard to breathe. And yet the peasants put into their work all the strength of which their poor physique is capable. Their sun-burnt and wrinkled faces, lean and lanky limbs, weary steps, stooping gait, cavernous eyes, dimmed and dazzled by the glare, their parched lips which a still more dried tongue vainly tries to moisten, make a figure that the pen finds it beyond its power to portray. They perspire profusely and pitifully pant for breath, and yet they go on working with undisturbed and undiminishing devotion. After sunset when the work is finished these tired people take their way home with dragging steps. There too the duty that awaits them is hardly less rigorous. They have to draw water for household use and for their cattle. At the close of the evening they take their meal consisting of half-baked bulky brown bread and a pinch of salt, and then retire to sleep. But the sleep too is often disturbed by alarms of fire in the village. Cases of incendiarism are neither few nor far between in this part of the year. They are mostly due to neighbours' quarrels, private feuds, jealousies, religious or social animosities, imaginary grievances, and last but, not least the accident of a stray spark emitted from the ubiquitous *chillum*. The moment a fire breaks out the poor people of the neighbourhood begin to pull down their thatches and fill their earthen pots with water. But sometimes nothing will arrest the speed and spread of the fire, and the fierce flames fanned by

the dry wind fly from one house-top to another and in no time the whole village is ablaze. The crying of infants, the sobbing of women and the sighing of the aged make the scene a tragedy. In the lurid light of the conflagration the disappointment and sorrow of those whose houses are burning and who are doing all that they can do to defeat an implacable enemy present a perfect picture of helplessness. They are left to the mercy of chance, destitute of means and with nothing saved to call their own. Fire often breaks out just when the spring harvest has been gathered, with the result that food, clothing and shelter disappear simultaneously. Such a scene is touching and in a degree unimaginable.

The next task for the poor peasants in the hot weather is to repair and re-thatch their houses. This entails a vast amount of labour. They carry the clay on their head from neighbouring tanks and plaster the walls with it. This yearly repairing hardly withstands the inroads of the rains; but it is the utmost they can do. In thatching they work their fingers to bleeding. The rope which they use is so very rough and coarse that it eats into the flesh and makes their hands full of sores. But the last chapter of their labour makes all the preceding seem tame. This is the work of digging their fields and turning the earth with the spade. The sun gives its heat to the soil and thereby increases its productivity, but in the process it makes it as hard as rock. Who can picture to himself, if he has not been an eye-witness of the scene, a half-starved human being standing in the sun-

smitten fields, in a brutally hot weather, covered with dust from head to foot, and working himself to the bone? Often there comes a sun-stroke in the hot fit of hard work, and a miserable life comes to a sudden end.



### VIII.—WATERING THE FIELDS.

The farmers find themselves in difficulties for money when the time of watering their fields comes near. It is again a serious problem, and as usual they wait upon the local moneylender, who again gets a chance of fleecing them. He receives them warmly, but when they disclose the purpose of their visit he puts on another face. The poor peasants have to bear any kind of look. For them there is no other course open. After much haggling a bargain is struck—or what both parties regard as a bargain. But the conditions which hedge round the loan make a terrible trap for an unsuspecting victim. The peasants pay as much as they can, pay all their lives, but find themselves always as deeply sunk in debt as before. Often it so happens that the fields remain unwatered for want of funds.

There is a long-established practice as to who should water his fields first from a certain tank. When priority is disputed it leads to a quarrel which sometimes terminates in an open rupture. When there is no custom or right of precedence and a man is quick enough to engage labourers first, he puts this forth as a strong argument in his favour for first drawing water for his fields. This they do, not with a view to mischief-making, but with the sole object of getting a few more buckets of water than his due share. To the poor peasants their fields are everything—the mainstay of their hope and existence. Now they prepare a small

channel from the tank to the fields and make other minor arrangements for irrigating the crops. When everything is ready the work begins. It is started from early in the morning. The labourers are seen trooping towards the fields, bare-footed, with a thin and tattered wrapper hanging round their shoulders, and the keen westerly wind piercing their skin. Before the work is taken in hand the labourers gather dry leaves and make a fire to warm themselves, but their desire is delusive, for against the chilliness of the weather their long pulls at their *chillum* utterly fail to protect them. Yet they cling round the fire which they keep alive by blowing. By this time the sun's rays become perceptibly felt, and they set themselves to their work.

A pair of labourers stand on the bank of the tank, ankle-deep in mud, and by means of a bucket tied with a coarse rope at both ends throw the water up to a little mound, from which elevation it flows through small channels into the field. They bend down a little each time they have to fill the bucket and then straighten up to empty it. The elderly members of the family of the owner himself busy themselves in directing the water to its proper course. On the way the flow of water is sometimes obstructed by small embankments or impediments and in some places the flow is so rapid as to cut the edge of the channel. When one tract of the field is watered the course is changed to another. The owner frequently calls upon the labourers to work more zealously when he notices the current runs thinly, and moreover, with the object to get more than full value for the money paid in wages. On

the other hand the labourers, who know their tricks well enough, work on at the same pace, so as to turn out as little work as possible each day and thus lengthen the period of their employment. When they are tired and their finger tips and toes are so benumbed that they are unable to stand any longer they are given a respite, and their place is taken by another pair of labourers, the loosened team meanwhile warming themselves and making merry over their *chillum*. They smoke deep and smoke long, because they have not had to buy the tobacco, which is presented as one of their perquisites. The rough-skinned rope eats into their flesh and makes their fingers bleed.

With only a brief intermission the work goes on till sunset. When it is finished the labourers walk back home, as tired as labouring cattle, famished and footsore. Here they warm themselves as much as they can, but that gives little relief to their fatigue and less to their smarting fingers and toes. If the easterly wind begins to blow it is more hard for them, for old pains are revived to mingle with the new.

First, only small patches of cloud appear on the horizon and they float in different directions. The harder the wind blows the more it intensifies the cold. The clouds become more thick and dark and rapidly spread along the sky. At last it starts raining. This is a more trying time for the poor. The leaking cottage, the uncarpeted cot, and their quilt full of rents and holes, afford them scanty protection, and they sit out the whole night, thinking ill of Indra, the god of rain, because from the next day they are thrown out of employment.

Those whose fields were not yet watered rejoice, while those whose fields were already watered lament the loss of expenses. But when it thunders, as it generally does before a hail-storm in this season, the sympathy of everybody centres round the crop, the common concern of the whole nation.

## IX.—DUST-STORMS.

There is generally a deep lull before the breaking of a dust-storm. The weather becomes close and oppressive. This presages an atmospheric disturbance. There is first a faint flutter, then a perceptible stirring of the leaves, then a continuous current of air which gradually strengthens and blows in louder and louder gusts till it assumes at last the ferocity of a gale. It shrieks and howls shrilly as it tears through the tops of the trees, which sway, and bend and threaten to fall down on the head of the passers-by. A cloud of dust of mountainous height darkens the horizon and towering to the sky sails onward on the wings of the wind. If the first storm comes from the west the people hope for a good monsoon. When the storm approaches near it makes a noise like the moaning that precedes a whirlwind on the sea. If the storm breaks in the night it envelopes the whole village in a thick veil of dust which, added to the nocturnal darkness, makes it difficult for one to see one's own stretched hand. Breathing becomes so difficult that one feels choked. The wind blows dust and sand and dashes small pebbles and debris into one's face till it is dangerous to open one's eyes. The longer the storm lasts the severer it blows. The first care of the poor is to extinguish every spark of fire about the house, and their next thought is to run out to collect their children who may be playing in the secluded and less frequented parts of the village. Lights go out, all is darkness

within and without, here, there and everywhere, and it is as hard to keep within doors as to walk abroad. The women become troubled with superstitious fears and hide their infants under their head-cloth or clasp them tenderly to their bosom. Their anxious looks, their panic-painted faces, their plaintive whispered conversation and their pious repetition of the names of the gods who are believed to possess the power of tranquillising the evil spirit of the storm, impart a solemnity to the scene.

The cattle become restive, break loose, and make a stampede. Their owners call them back at first by name, and then with endearing epithets added to the appeal to return, and when all this goes unheeded, they resort to the most abusive language. But the frightened herds bound and bound wildly across the fields. The chase after them proves futile. The neighing of pack ponies, the bellowing of cows and she-buffaloes and the bleating of sheep and she-goats make a roar that rises even above the storm. And when, as sometimes happens, the storm swells into a cyclone, it uproots trees which often fall with a crash upon the head of a wayfarer and crushes him to death.

The storm sweeps the village clean, but it blows all the rubbish into the houses of the poor people and makes all the stock of food blended with dust. Thatches are blown away, crushed and crumpled, and knocked about. They are past repairing. If the storm is followed by a shower of rain the unfortunate inhabitants find themselves

without shelter. All the men and women of the family huddled together crouch against the walls and become wet to the skin. Storm or rain, both mean misery for the poor agriculturist, who is the mainstay of the nation.

## X.—THE RAINY SEASON.

After the scorching heat of May and June the poor people of the village heave a sigh of relief when the first shower of rain comes down. But as soon as it ceases the wind holds its breath. The air becomes close, muggy and 'steamy. The sun-baked earth gives off the accumulated heat of the long summer days. But the rain is a signal for the poor cultivators to apply themselves wholeheartedly to field work, which makes them forget the severity of the weather. This is the time for the farmers to be up and doing. They set themselves to the business of sowing seed. They believe that if the crops are not sown within three days of the breaking of the monsoon the harvest will be a meagre one. But if the seed is sown before the heat of the soil has radiated completely, the crops will grow in abundance and promise a good harvest. Long before the break of dawn the peasants begin their work and it lasts till after sunset. Untiringly, unremittingly and uncomplainingly they carry on their toil with a devotion which is never defeated. The sun, now unscreened by vapour or by dust, beats fiercely upon their shaven heads. Its vertical rays seem to pierce through their shrunken and shrivelled bodies; and yet they heroically struggle on with their labours despite the difficulties that they daily encounter at every step. The only breathing time that they allow themselves is when they feed and water their oxen. As soon as this is done the work is resumed.



All that they themselves eat during the day is a few mouthfuls of parched grain which they quickly munch and swallow and wash down with a few draughts of water from some neighbouring tank.

Before darkness gathers in the evening they patiently plod their weary way home to a cottage situated amid unhealthy surroundings. The stink that emanates from the rubbish heaps about the villages is almost unbearable: it is a poisonous exhalation contaminating the whole village. All the little ponds and ditches fill up with filthy rain water which stagnates and puts on a mossy green surface of scum and makes the atmosphere of the locality foul and damp. After heavy rain the whole village area is practically under water. Even for going from one door to another one has to wade ankle-deep through sticky mud.

Even after the toils of the day the poor peasants are often robbed of the soothing influence of sleep, by being distressfully disturbed by bugs and mosquitoes at night. If they sleep in the open air the rain comes on and wets them, and if they go into the house they have to face the persecution of these domestic vermin.

During the rainy season cases of snake-bite are of common occurrence. The victims die helplessly without obtaining even the semblance of medical aid. The poor fellow who is bitten by a snake lies senseless on the ground surrounded by a crowd of spectators and by men who are considered experts in curing snake-bite. These people mutter incantations, call the patient loudly by his name, and

strike small dishes against one another to make a clattering noise to keep him awake. All this rarely effects a cure, and the poor man's life slowly ebbs away.

There is one more important cause that makes the lives of poor villagers miserable. Thieves and burglars infest the country areas and ply their nefarious trade with impunity. If perchance the poor rustic has fallen asleep, his slumber is so deep that he is more like one dead than alive. The moist wind fans his brow and lulls him in a moment, and the day's toil makes him sleep heavily. But in the morning when he wakes he may find himself robbed of his clothes and his cooking utensils, his only belongings on earth.

When the rainy season has advanced enough you see everything green—fields covered with new crops, the ground spread over with fresh grass, the trees decked with bright leaves. Nature seems to have started into life with renewed youth to look with a happy smile on her freer children of the forest and field. One feels through all things a glorious thrill and a mysterious joy. In fact, what one actually feels defies description. Those of us who live in towns have no idea of what the countryside is like in the rainy season. Town dwellers do not feel any positive ecstasy—on the contrary their habit of keeping indoors makes time hang heavily on their hands and dulls their spirits. The muddy streets and lanes, the crowded habitations, the high buildings, the incessant noise and movement, the self-absorbed crowding and crushing shut out every possibility

of their deriving pleasure or profit from the revivifying forces of Nature.

To sit amidst a cluster of trees in the evening, canopied with bowers, screened by the thick foliage, cooled by the drizzling rain, fanned by the soft breeze, entertained by the melodious singing of the Koel and the dancing of the peacock, is a pleasure more congenial to the heart than the gloss of "ten thousands baneful arts combined." The deep silence of this sylvan retreat seems to have been blessed with speech, and it speaks so eloquently to one's heart that one is thrown into a fit of musing and lost in oneself. Mundane thoughts take to flight and the mind is filled up with beatific visions. When the evening begins to verge towards night the cattle return from the pasture followed by the shepherds who merrily sing some rustic song. The cows and she-buffaloes contentedly lick their young ones who frolic and frisk about, and come back eagerly again to be caressed. After the close of the evening the atmosphere is filled with the humming and buzzing of insects who make a raid in one unending stream upon all places where light is seen, and circle round and round the flame. These insects vary in shape and size as also in degrees of offensive smell. One has to take one's meal in the dark. During the silent hours of the night when the sky is thickly covered with black clouds, intensifying the darkness, the rain descending in sable sheets, the low moaning of the wind and the occasional flashes of the lightning followed by the rumbling peals of thunder, all these make the silence felt more

deeply. The down-hanging clouds seem to whisper some secret message to the world.

If one goes out to the fields there the scene appears charming to the sight, surpassing in beauty, impressive in grandeur, lasting in effect and hopeful in prospects. It inspires ambitions and encourages fair dreams of fulfilment.


The reflection of the fields in the water when they happen to be on the borders of some tank fringed with woods, bathed in the soft golden hues of the setting sun, is simply grand. It is practically beyond the power of human words to picture a scene so ravishing vividly enough for the city-dweller to realize.

Sometimes for days together it rains almost without an intermission or break. The shortest pause is made up by a heavy downpour. The whole village area is practically under water, and the life of the poor people is particularly wretched during these days of deluge. At short intervals they look up towards the sky to see if the dark thick clouds are whitening or thinning, but soon they turn away their eyes in disappointment. There is a superstition about persistent rain: they believe that the burying of fire in the earth will stop incessant raining. And so they follow the observance, but still the rain does not stop. It goes on falling in copious showers. Even the rainbow appears to them to presage a break. The poor crouch against the damp walls in the wet corners of their leaking sodden cottage. In one corner lies the grain garnered; another is reserved as the cooking place and the store; a third for hanging their dripping clothes; and the only remaining

corner provides them with just room to huddle together. Their cheerless solitude calls up all gloomy thoughts of the future which have already dug deep furrows on their forehead. They pass sleepless nights for want of a dry spot to lie on.

And what is this cottage? It is only a wretched hovel enveloped in the inky darkness of a raining night, the wind fiercely howling around it, the rain slapping the ill-repaired mud walls, and the poor inhabitants oppressed with the fear of being buried alive under the walls if they collapse. They pass the night without food either. The damp saturates and spoils all available articles of food. Fire will not burn in spite of vigorous blowing. The condensed smoke gathers thick inside the hut and reddens the eyes of the people within, and their eyes and noses run freely. The cattle suffer as much from the rain as their owners. They lose their appetite and become unfit for work. The remedy is to give them salt which does them much good. It will not do for the people to keep indoors for the fear of the rain: they have to go out to watch their growing crops. Tears rise in their eyes and flow faster than the drops from the sky to see their crops turning pale and drooping with the load of moisture upon their head. The peasants make a passage in their fields for the water to flow out, but this is of no avail when it rains in torrents or when some neighbouring tank overflows them.

The case is just the reverse when the monsoon is late in arriving, or when the showers are insufficient and scanty or few and far between, and



the worst of all, when the rain altogether fails. There is then a great commotion among the farmers. Tantalizing clouds play hide and seek in the sky and torment the poor people with false hopes. In the dark hour of despair their superstitious beliefs sometimes stimulate their drooping spirits and for a time bring a faint flicker of hope or satisfaction into their breast. If the moon rises surrounded by a large halo they cheer up, for they believe that it is an unfailing sign of fast approaching rain. The farther the halo is from the disc of the moon the higher the hopes for the coming rain. Another superstitious practice is that the people form themselves into groups and go from door to door and at each door they roll on the ground and pitifully address their appeal to Heaven to send down a shower of rain. As a last resort the otherwise neglected idol of Shiva of the village temple is devoutly worshipped, and hundreds of jugs and pails of water are poured upon it.

But often all this does not bring a single drop of rain to the earth. Cruel cares and maddening anxieties distract the poor people as they watch their crops gradually drying up. The neighbouring tanks sometimes do not hold sufficient water and sometimes the watering of the fields from newly-dug small wells is practically out of the question for want of funds. The rice crop is such a delicate crop that a single day's delay in irrigating it causes much harm. Now famine openly stares the people in the face. The premonition of their future, dark and desolate, looms distinctly upon their mind like a shadow on the horizon.

Even in years of normal rainfall during the first part of the rainy season the birds have to fast, as the proverb goes. The little stock of grain begins to disappear faster than they have foreseen, and money is nowhere available to buy more. Their credit based on the prospects of their crops vanishes with the prospects. First the women pawn their trinkets to feed their young ones. Next the extra cooking utensils are secretly disposed of, then the cattle, and lastly,—well, there is nothing left to pawn or sell: those who fed others begin to starve themselves and prepare for death.

## XI.—FLOODS.

Signs are not, as a rule, wanting to presage floods, but they are generally misunderstood to be due to incessant local downpours. The river is in high flood, and people go to bed at night in the hope that the temporary rise will subside by morning time, but what they have actually to face is far different. The noise of a vast volume of swift flowing water amidst the splash of a heavily raining dark night wakes even the heavily sleeping labourer from his sleep, and he gets up to find his house girt round with water. The occasional flashes of lightning reveal the greater gravity of the situation. There is great consternation among the whole people. The flood sweeps on, expands and stretches longer and wider, and the people are more and more agitated. First they decide to run away and to take all their belongings with them; but soon they discover the futility of such an attempt in the face of the advancing tide. Now they perch their children upon their shoulders and some of them they fasten on their back, and the very young ones the women clasp to their bosom, and the party is ready to depart. They cast a lingering look on their submerged homesteads which though nothing more than a mud heap, is associated with many happy and cherished memories. They splash their way through in the pitch darkness, followed by their cattle who often



become restive and break loose and turn turtle in struggling through the swelling water of the river.

If a man is caught in a whirlpool he is suddenly swept off his feet. He vainly struggles with the overpowering force of a swollen and rushing current. Sometimes in the attempt to rescue him several members of the family share his fate. They plod on with patience, but the further they go the more distant does land seem to be, for the floods flow faster in the same direction. At last when they find that the waters become deeper and deeper they give a farewell pat to their cattle and with a heavy heart leave them to struggle towards the bank. Only a few of the cattle survive: the rest toss up and down the current, and drift hither and thither until they are drowned. People hurriedly climb upon trees, but the difficulty that womenfolk experience is only overcome by the fear of being drowned. Their dripping clothes make the task of climbing trees more arduous. However they drag themselves up and somehow find a leafy loft among the branches. They cling and crouch and are chilled by the moistladen wind. The more the floods swell up the higher they climb. If the tree they climb on is not high enough then death is inevitable. When the dawn breaks a vast expanse of muddy water is the only thing that is seen. Where once there stood a busy village now rages a foaming current. Completely exhausted by fatigue, worn out by want of food and sleep, and above all constantly tortured by fear, the people pass their time in cruel expectation of death.

Imagination can better paint a mental picture of their distress than words can depict their actual condition. Whatever food they had brought with them they give to their children. The grown-up people cheerfully suffer starvation. No assistance or help is forthcoming as it would be in towns. The lower the water subsides the lower they descend and after a couple of days their feet touch dry land. Homeless and hungry they wander from village to village and know not what to do to find food and lodging. It is a heart-rending scene to see those people so utterly destitute on whose labours the community depends for its own living.

## XII.—WINTER.

The lot of the poor people in Indian villages is particularly wretched in winter. The tillers of the land, "the virtual feeders of the nation," toil unremittingly against overwhelming odds of adverse circumstances and the severities of the weather from day to day. Yet at the end of the year they are as poor as they were at the beginning. Not all of them, except on rare occasions, know two meals in the twenty-four hours, and particularly in the month of January, the coldest month, their stock of food is at the lowest ebb. Some of them have no warm clothes to protect them from the inclement season. From early in the morning until late in the night they have often to stand ankle-deep in the mud when they water their fields. They become terribly sore-footed with frost-bitten finger-tips. The poorest among them with their fleshless and sun-burnt faces, sunken eyes, high cheek-bones, emaciated frame, languid footsteps tell a pathetic tale of misery which offers the strongest refutation of the tall talk that one often hears about India's growing opulence and prosperity. Even their loin-cloth has large rents which are past mending. And yet for the sake of producing the country's bread they toil as much as they can. This is a martyrdom beyond all praise. If they once fail in their heroic struggle against difficulties, the whole country will be doomed to starvation. To the votaries of fashion moving in what is called "polite society" these poor peasants may appear what the "sansculottes" did to the

eyes of the French aristocracy immediately before the Revolution—a low, down-trodden race, born but to be trampled underfoot by the purple-clad nobility. But as a matter of fact the purple and ermine would itself be trodden down if it were not for the ungrudging labours of these humble helots. After the toil of the day when they return to their homes in the evening, they do not come into what poets picture as a nest of domestic comfort and affection, but to a low-roofed hovel situated amid squalid surroundings and presenting a picture of darkness and distress. The cry of their little ones, when they clamour for food and get none, goes into their hearts like a stab. They sit at the fire (made up by lighting a heap of rubbish) all the night, and when overcome by extreme fatigue and sleep they, like rats, betake themselves among the heaps of straw and stacks of fodder collected for their cattle. They get up before the dawn begins to streak the eastern sky and devote themselves heart and soul to their work, and that makes them deaf to the “churlish chiding of the winter’s wind.” In these bitterly cold nights the weak ones are often frozen to death. In life everything is denied to them and after death sometimes, even a simple burial. Many of us may think that the picture is overdrawn. But our actual knowledge of the rural areas is practically nil. The general belief is that the time spent in the country is wasted, although in point of fact the opportunities afforded there of coming in contact with the great spirit of the universe are unlimited. Such communing animates our soul with emotions and aspirations unfelt before, and makes us see things.

in their true colour. The majestic solitude of the fields, the freshness of the breeze, the absence of artificialities, each of these features of the country is simply charming; while in the towns the hurry and hustle, the smoky and stale air, the noise of traffic, the choking and blinding dust, the crushes of games, sports and amusements, put a severe strain on the nerves and preclude every possibility of quiet thinking. Much of the misfortune of the poor people will disappear if great men only care to spend a little of their time in studying village life on the spot, which is more profitable than to bend over the dreary pages of the history of olden times or even contemporary history chronicled in the columns of the daily paper.

### XIII.—THE MANGO AND JAMUN CROPS.

From the time when the mango and jamun trees begin to blossom the poor people look at them with greedy eyes. The nearer the time for fruit approaches the more tempting becomes the prospect. Hope dawns in their breast, and a gleam lurks in their eyes as they gaze at the blossom-laden trees, promising an early crop of luscious fruits. But eventually when the trees bear fruit the crop is purchased by some neighbouring fruiterer, who keeps a constant watch over them to prevent pilfering. The poor people are thus deprived of their only chance of getting a gratuitous share of the fruit to eat. The fruiterer thatches a little hut in the middle of the grove, and posts himself there on guard at all hours of the day and night, beguiling the tedium of time with pulls at his *hookah*. When he goes home for meals he is relieved from his sentinel duty by some member of his family. This work of keeping watch and ward is generally assigned to old people. In the first place they are not heavy sleepers, and in the second, they cough all the night and the coughing is as good a warning to intending thieves as the shrill whistle of a *chaukidar*. Finally, even supposing that the old watcher is belaboured by a ruffianly thief, or bitten by a poisonous snake at night and so dies, the family or the community does not suffer much loss in the "riddance" of an outworn decrepit. When a furious dust-storm comes it dashes down the little mangoes. The

whole grove is shrouded in dust which provides a convenient screen for pilfering bands to make raids on the orchard. Even the old people throw off their lethargy and become agile and set about gathering mangoes in the neighbouring clumps. The fruiterer shouts and runs after the gatherers, and then darts back again to his hut to guard his own collected store, or to save the hut from being blown away. Forwards he runs again to get hold of the thievish knaves who are busy gathering the fallen mangoes, and back again he runs in chase of his cap or wrapper blown away by the wind. At last utterly tired he sits down in despair and vents his feelings in the filthiest language. So too during the moonless silent watch of the night the young people of the village with feline tread come to the orchard to climb on the trees to pluck some mangoes if the fruiterer happens to be asleep or away for the time being, which indeed is not often the case. The fruiterer pelts the trespassers with stones, and they climb up the topmost boughs and from that safe height defy their captor. But their thieving is done not to satisfy a gourmet's taste, but to silence the insistent clamouring of hunger. Even when the mangoes are green and raw the people eat them and make pickles of them. Their stones are actually hoarded by the poor for the purpose of being dried and powdered into flour. One handful of this with a pinch of salt is sometimes all that they have for a meal.

#### XIV.—THE WHEAT CROP.

There are signs of marked activity among the peasants when the time of sowing the wheat crop draws near. Fields are prepared as quickly as possible, so that the soil saturated by the rains may not dry up, for if the moisture is lost the hard clods have to be broken loose, which means much heavier labour. There is also a superstitious reason for hurry: the peasants believe that if the fields are not sown during the first thirteen days of the dark half of *Kartik* (October-November) their yield will be but poor. Now oxen, little cared for during the rains, are lovingly looked after and liberally fed. If by chance they are sick, the *ryat* hastens to beg or borrow money to buy drugs for them. If one or both of the team die the poor man is maddened with grief. He is appalled by the terrible difficulty of raising money to buy a fresh team. Go where he may he meets with nothing but disappointment. At last he is reluctantly obliged to pawn his wife's trinkets for half of their worth, and they ultimately pass out of his hands and become the property of the pawnbroker, whose extortionate rates of interest added to the principal the poor man is never able to pay up.

But if he gets over this initial difficulty he is faced with a bigger and more serious one. This is the want of seed. If a poor man has not got seed to sow he is in sore straits. After running in vain hither and thither he has ultimately to go to the local money-lender who welcomes him warmly



with flattering words and cunningly spreads the net to entrap him, by touching as if inadvertently on some incident of either joy or sorrow, as the case may be, in the house of the visitor so as to find an easy way to his heart. When the poor man explains his present visit the Mahajan wears a regretful face, for these human leeches are adepts in trickery. "We are poor men," he says, "we invest what little we have only where there is hope of profit, even to the extent of a pice. You will not withhold our dues, this is certain; for your forefather before you was all along quite fair in his dealing with us, but at present I am sorry I can provide nothing for you." This reply, though given with a show of sympathy, shocks the poor man and he entreats and implores the Mahajan to take pity. The Mahajan gloats over his humiliation and eagerly waits for an opportunity to strike a bargain. At last when he finds the victim completely enmeshed he pretends to give his consent with some indifference, but the rate of interest and other stipulations pertaining to the loan are settled on terms too complicated for the simple farmer to comprehend and too rigorous for him ever to fulfil. When, however, he does receive the money in his hand, he takes his way home.

Now he consults the village priest and asks him to fix an auspicious day for starting the work of sowing. The "Pandit" ponders over his almanac chart, counts something on his fingers and audibly mutters some figure, so as to create the impression of being engaged in profound astrological calculations of which he has practically no knowledge. If the harvest turns out to be good he

takes all the credit of it to himself; and if otherwise, the ill-luck of the peasant and other causes are held responsible for the failure.

Long before the break of day and after many silent prayers to the deities of the family and the village the work of sowing at last begins. This duty is assigned only to practised hands. It is an art which nothing but practice can teach. The soft and fresh air of a dewy morning gently fans the sowers' sweating brow and sweetens their sour labour. They sing merry songs, and these songs bring a crowd of associations into the mind and throw the simple heart into greater raptures than the swell of picked voices or instrumental music in a music hall or opera-house. Towards noon the work is stopped for a time; the oxen are fed and the men take their meals; and the fierce heat of the sun is allowed to abate before the work is resumed in the afternoon, when it is kept in full swing till evening.

## XV.—AUTUMN CROPS.

In poor houses, after satisfying the most pressing needs of the household and meeting all unavoidable expense such as paying the dues of the zamindars and squaring the account of the local money-lender, there is very little left of the yield of the rice crop. The temporary prosperity brought on by the harvest season is a very short-lived sunshine. In a few weeks the people relapse into their original indigence. The severity of the cold weather, the want of proper sustenance and the lack of warm clothing—all these cast a gloom over their existence again. However, the sight of their fields enriched again with standing crops towards the close of the rainy season sustains their drooping spirits and revives hope, and the prospect of reaping a good harvest in autumn temporarily lights up gloomy faces. The maize crop is now their only solace. To watch it, the peasants erect a bamboo scaffolding in the centre of the field. It is quite simple in structure, consisting of four bamboo poles planted in the ground in the form of a square with a small platform, covered with thatch, placed on the top of them, ten or twelve feet above the ground, for the maize plants grow to almost double the height of man.

After taking his evening meal some elderly member of the family betakes himself to the field and occupies this lofty perch for the purpose of keeping watch and ward at night. He takes with him his *hookah* and some fire in an earthen pot

buried in ashes to keep it alive. He spreads a thin layer of straw on the perch to lie upon, and a tattered cotton quilt to wrap himself with. In the first part of the night he manages to snatch some sleep, but during the rest of the night he lies midway between sleep and waking, giving out frequent hems, coughs and cries to warn the neighbourhood that he is alert. The faintest sound such as the stirring of a dry leaf startles him, and he emits his loudest hems in the most aggressive tone. When satisfied at last that it was but a false alarm he composes himself for a smoke, fills his *chillum* and pulls away at his *hookah* for quite half an hour before he proceeds to take his next instalment of sleep. But often his sleep is broken and disturbed, and sometimes it even happens that he rolls over and off the narrow platform.

After midnight when there begins to be a nip in the wind and a distinct dampness in the air, his thin covering affords but little protection against the cold, and the poor peasant finds it impossible to summon sleep again. He is therefore content to smoke out the remaining hours of the night. Before the break of dawn he comes down from his perch, wearied with his watch and frozen with cold. His place on the scaffolding is then taken by some unruly stripling of the house. Up there, he is safe and out of mischief's way. His duty is to keep away birds from the field, and in doing so he cries aloud and uses the most abusive language and also his sling against the birds. And he feels quite happy in keeping this sportive watch over the crop.

The autumn crops consist of kinds of grain which are coarse and unsuitable for the consumption of rich men or men of epicurean taste. But for the poor such food is a God-send. The trouble to which the peasants are put in gathering the harvest of the late rice is more than they experience in any other harvest. This crop grows in tanks. The labourers have to stand in knee-deep water from dawn to dusk, bare-bodied and bare-footed, when the crops are being reaped. They take with them a cot and whatever they cut they heap upon it. When the cot is laden they drag it out of the water and deposit the harvest on a piece of dry land, repeating this process a number of times daily for days on end. It is a pitiful sight to watch the poor when after a livelong day's toil and suffering they return home in the evening with a dripping load of rice plants on their head.

## XVI.—THE RICE CROP.

It is difficult to describe the hope and joy which fill the poor peasants when after months of partial starvation the time approaches for cutting the rice crop. The hope of living a comparatively easy life even for a few days springs in their breast and makes their faces beam with delight. However, disillusionment is not slow in coming. What the crops actually yield is by far less than their expectations, and absolutely insufficient to cover their most necessary expenses. During these days labourers, who in village command wages fluctuating according to demand, become scarce and ask very high wages. There is a sudden demand, and consequently a sudden inflation in the prices of labour. If anybody reasons with them to persuade them to accept lower rates they lose their tempers or sarcastically offer to work for nothing. In short they obtain whatever they demand, and besides that they are humoured and cajoled so that they may not run away leaving the work unfinished. At last after much higgling the work of cutting crops begins, and it goes on almost without a pause from early morning till late in the evening. But the labour is so painful and exacting that it is almost beyond the highest flight of imagination of those who have not seen it done.

The October sun, undimmed by dust or cloud, shines with scorching severity on the uncovered heads of the reapers and tans their perspiring skin, and still they go on with their work unmindful of

the heat or sweat. There is a common saying in rustic circles which although used in a figurative sense contains a certain amount of truth, and it is this, that "the clear sun of October is so very bright that it burns the deer black." The reapers quench their thirst by drinking the foul water of some neighbouring tank, and eat cucumbers or swallow a few mouthfuls of parched gram. At intervals they allow themselves time to smoke their *chillum*. They take long pulls at it, making the live charcoal glow into a flame. This braces them up with fresh energy.

The latter part of the day is spent in gathering and bundling the reaped harvest, and when this is done they carry the loads on their head to where the harvest is stocked. They move now with languid steps tired after the labour of the day, sustained by a scanty meal, the stooping of their body under the heavy burden, the protuberant eyeballs, the laboured breathing, all going to show their state of utter exhaustion. However they do not lose heart but heroically struggle with the hardship of their lot. They even hum a tune when plodding their weary way to their resting place.

When this work is finished they hurry away to their homes and rush through their meal and after smoking for a short while they again return to the place where the harvest is stocked. They snatch a few winks of sleep in the first part of the night and then lie awake during the rest to keep watch over their bundles of harvest.

Much before the dawn is heralded by the cock-crow they are on their legs again and resume their work of reaping, and when this is finished the

threshing and winnowing begins which is not at all less laborious. During this time if the sky is overcast with clouds it is difficult to describe the feelings of the poor peasants, for rains spoil everything.

After all a big heap of grain greets their eyes and with a look of pride and satisfaction they view. The perquisite of the labourers, carpenters and blacksmiths and the rent to be paid to the zamindar almost swallows it up and whatever remains is swept away in the payment of the local money-lender, who out-Herods Herod in his demands, and realizes the dues of his everswelling account with unrelenting severity. The poor people look with speechless appeals, but the money-lender only looks greedily at the grain, which grown and gathered with the sweat of the peasants' brow passes ultimately into his hands, and the "thought of the morrow" begins again to torture the poor people.



## XVII.—THE POPPY-HEAD CROP.

Of all the crops raised in the United Provinces the cultivation of the poppy-head is the only one made easy for the farmer. Money is advanced to them, free of interest. This is a great concession and a strong inducement. This money is distributed in September. To get these advances people come from far and wide of the district. Every hardship of the journey they cheerfully bear, every kind of trouble they patiently undergo, and every difficulty they vigorously face to reach their destination in time. They travel in groups, both for the sake of convenience and protection. They pursue their journey from dawn to dusk, walking ceaselessly and halting but once at midday to munch a few mouthfuls of parched grain and to gulp down a jugful of water, or to take a pull at the fraternal *hookah*. At nightfall they stop under a tree on the roadside. There their first care is to cook their meal on a smouldering fire of cowdung or a bundle of faggot which they pick up on the way. It often happens that when the meal is ready it begins to rain, and the miserable wayfarers have to eat soaked bread or to go without food altogether. Cases of snake-bite also occur. When they arrive at their destination they have often to grease the palms of the staff of the disbursing official before the machinery for payment can move smoothly in their case. After going through other formalities they get the money on the personal security of some well-to-do resident of their

village who gets a small commission on the sum advanced. As soon as they get the money they retrace their way home. This time it is not a very safe journey. The fact that they have money with them gets known, and they are sometimes waylaid and robbed and return home as penniless as when they started.

Poppy-heads are sown in November. The cultivation involves much expenditure, for this crop has to be watered several times. In February the buds are ripe to be ripped open by a sort of lancet, similar in shape to a nail-parer but smaller in size. Four or five of them are tied together for the purpose of making incisions. This work is done only by experienced hands. An incision is made in the bud and a white fluid oozes out which is left to be dried and hardened on the pods. While engaged in this work the workers step back, otherwise the white matter is apt to be wiped away by their clothes. The whole process requires extreme care and dexterity. The oozing matter is strong in smell and so heating that some of the workers become temporarily nightblind and suffer from giddiness.

Now is a golden opportunity for opium eaters. They steal into the field and lick away the white matter, which even in this crude form is a strong intoxicant. A couple of days after the incision the white matter is gathered into a small pot, emptied into a larger one when the first pot is filled.

The poppy in flower is very picturesque. The flowers are milky white. The effect is enhanced by its being surrounded with other crops of green or brown colour. Ultimately the crop is cut, and

the shell of the pods is broken and the seeds are beaten out and gathered for other purposes. In May the farmers have to make over their stock of opium to the Opium Officer of Government from whom they had received the advances. If some of the opium happens to be stolen while it is being taken for delivery to Government the Police show much zeal in bringing the culprit to book. The opium is carried in earthen plates covered with cloth. It is examined by the officer who pays the stipulated price after deducting the amount already advanced. If the opium appears to be mixed up with some other matter the payment is withheld until it is examined by experts and the account is settled in the next season.

### **XVIII.—PRESSING THE SUGAR-CANE.**

After gathering their autumn harvest the farmers direct their attention to the pressing of the sugar-cane. There are renewed signs of activity. Carpenters and blacksmiths are engaged to repair pressing machines, which the cultivator does not own but hires at high rates of payment. Further, the labourers are humoured with honied words, but they screw up their demands to the utmost and morosely refuse to take a single pice less. Theirs is the last word. The peasants have to acquiesce and yield. Ordinarily in every village there is only one place where the people bring their sugar-cane to be pressed turn by turn, each paying his due share of the hire of the machine.

When at last the work begins the poor people are seen from very early in the morning engaged in the fields cutting the sugar-cane, and shivering in the cold of the early morning. At noon the sugar-cane is gathered, tied in bundles and brought over to the place where it is to be pressed. Again in the afternoon the work is resumed and it is carried on vigorously till a little before the close of day. The cut harvest is hurriedly brought home, and the labourers return to the fields to gather the dry leaves dropped from the sugar-cane. This they do not do with the hands, but with small sticks, for otherwise their fingers would be sharply lacerated. While at work the labourers munch bits of the sugar-cane, sucking the sweet juice to quench thirst

and hunger in one operation. The winter season is for peasants one of the hardest periods of the year. They have practically nothing to eat. Almost the whole day they keep busy pressing the sugar-cane. The owner of the crop himself or the members of his family are at work, one relieving another just to give him time for bath and meals. The machine is worked round by a pair of bullocks, followed by a driver who twists their tail and urges them on with blows and curses as fast as he can shower them. When the team begins to gallop the driver receives an angry look from his employer and a sharp word from the person who is feeding the machine, because quick motion weakens the pressure and causes some quantity of the juice to be left uneconomically behind. The work of feeding the machine requires experience and diligence. Careless persons often get their fingers crushed. The pressed cane is dried in the sun and along with the dry leaves gathered from the field is then used as fuel, while the juice filled in big iron pots is thickened by boiling.

The boiling is done generally at night, and the man in charge of the work keeps awake all the time, stirring the fire. This ensures the safety of the village from the nefarious activities of thieves and burglars. The fire makes up for the paucity of clothing worn by the workmen and is therefore a welcome companion. After passing through several processes the final stage is reached when the juice is hardened enough to form into lumps of different sizes. As soon as these lumps are ready they are sent off to the market for sale. But before this is done some quantity of it is consumed by the

manufacturers themselves, for it is indeed hard for people to be working at the production of sugar without tasting it. The quantity that is ultimately sold fetches a handsome price and the farmer is for a brief while a prosperous man. But the necessities and obligations that did not seem to be pressing when there was no money are now felt as unavoidable, and their demands become irresistible, and before very long the money seems to have melted away in the hands of the farmers. In their penniless state they look forward to the spring crops to recoup them.

## XIX.—PLAGUE.

It is generally at the end of the cold weather that plague visits villages. It stalks abroad in the filthy village lanes, trampling under its iron heels the finest flowers of our peasantry. It attacks the undefended and crushes the helpless. Rats, cats and monkeys fall a victim to it first, and their destruction gives a warning to men to fly from the approaching terror. But flight is often out of question, and often not fast enough nor far enough, and the poor people are caught in the cruel toils and die like flies pitifully but unpitied. The place is panic-stricken and the foodless population also becomes homeless. The village is deserted, and its dreary appearance tells a touching tale of havoc and desolation. The poor people take shelter under trees and go into involuntary exile. After sunset when thick darkness envelopes their so-called camp it becomes a sort of pandemonium, with the shouting of the neighbours, the crying of the infants, the yelling of the young, the grumbling of the old, the murmuring of the women. However here and there a faint flickering spark of rushlight only tends to show the intensity of the darkness. These poor peasants simply parch a few grains of corn on the dying embers of a fire which they had made by laboriously collecting slender branches and twigs, and this handful of parched corn is all they can provide by way of a meal.

What an irony of fate that they who sweat from morn till eve to feed the country have

themselves to go without food or live on such scanty sustenance!

During the silent watch of the night they lie awake to keep guard, not over their belongings, of which they have little or none, but over their young ones, lest these should be carried off by wolves. Even the balm of hurt minds is denied to them. The lot of the sick who are left behind in the village is doubly deplorable. Physical pain, mental anguish, the dread of death and torturing thoughts of the gloomy future of wife and child make their existence worse than death. Without a drop of medicine and without means of procuring any, they die without leaving behind the common consolation of having tried all available remedies. Sometimes the bodies of those who die of plague are left uncremated or unburied. The thought of such terribly tragic termination of human life melts the heart to tears and wrings the feelings. When the village is mostly depopulated a deathlike silence and a gravelike stillness pervades everywhere. Thieves from the neighbouring villages greedily seize the opportunity and take away whatever they can lay their hands upon with perfect impunity. They put to flight all fear of law. Now to return to the exiles again. Chance always cheats and conspires against the unlucky. As if expulsion from home were not enough, rain is sure to come down upon the head of the homeless exiles. The wet season makes the nights abnormally cold and the poor people can hardly withstand it. The contagion which they contract by helplessly remaining in touch with their infected homes spreads to their open air camps as



well, and there too cases of plague occur. What refuge is there now for these hunted victims!

It is indeed a harrowing sight to see a plague patient. The poor creature lies on a heap of straw, with nothing but rotten rags to wrap himself with, groaning under sufferings caused by high fever, swollen glands, raging thirst, a splitting headache and a devouring and overmastering dread of death. The rains pour down in pitiless streams and the wind howls like a forlorn fiend. The heart-rending cries of women are answered only by the screeching of owls by night and the cawing of crows by day. By morning everything is over. The rain has ceased, the wind has dropped, the sun, though still hidden, begins to give light, but the scene revealed is one of death and desolation.

The death of poor peasants is really a national calamity, and one cannot help recalling to one's mind the oft-forgotten lines of Goldsmith:—

“Princes and Lords may flourish, or may fade,  
A breath can make them, as a breath has made,  
But a bold peasantry, their country's pride,  
When once destroyed can never be supplied.”

## XX.—SMALL-POX.

The spring season is the season for small-pox. A high and remittent fever is almost invariably the first symptom of this disease. Generally after three days pimples begin to appear on the reddened skin, followed by a prickly burning sensation. The patient is given no medicine, however great the necessity of medical aid. To give medicine is considered a deliberate offence to the goddess of small-pox. The people are in mortal dread. Their first care is to clean the house and to wash the apartment of the patient with cowdung and water. Visitors are not allowed, not for fear of variolous infection but for superstitious reasons, and if they do come they put off their shoes at the threshold. The wearing of shoes or black clothes is supposed to be an insolent act, well calculated to provoke the wrath of the goddess, who is believed to be the cause of this disease. There is no question of flying from the place, for it is said that to do so is but to court her displeasure.

Meat-eating, betel-chewing and the frying of food are all strictly prohibited. In the night a small vessel of water strewn with flowers is placed at the head of the patient's cot, and sugar dissolved in water is poured at the roots of a *neem* tree which is supposed to be the abode of the goddess.

The village priest reaps a rich harvest on such occasions of illness. He is in great demand for reciting verses from the sacred book containing

praises of the goddess. He readily accepts the job and performs it generally in the evening. He himself rarely understands what he reads, although every possible care is taken to assume the appearance of being absorbed in the recitation. Sometimes he waves his hands up and down while reciting, and at short intervals he ceases reciting simply to show that the work is so heavy that he is completely spent. The recitation is resumed after the sipping of a spoonful of water which at least serves the purpose of moistening the throat. If the priest finds himself in the house of a person who is acquainted with Sanskrit the poor fellow is in a fix. There his recitation is the funniest. He reads in such a tone that he is hardly audible, and he mumbles forth inarticulate words to while away the time and to skim over the pages. At last the work is finished and taking his perquisite, which varies according to the circumstances of the man who engages him, he hurries away from the house. Donkeys also have an easy time when small-pox is abroad. They are liberally fed, for they are believed to be the favoured animal of the goddess "Shitla" who rides on them. White ducks are also fed.

If pus forms in the pimples the condition of the patient becomes critical. He is practically unskinned. The absence of proper bedding and the want of nourishment make his chances small. He is made to lie down on ashes covered by a piece of cloth. This procedure, though it brings momentary relief, makes the new skin dirty and causes irritation which leads to graver consequences. A swarm of flies hovers upon the

patient who is constantly fanned by some woman of the house who remains all the time beside him.

Superstition and want of medical aid make the nation poorer by the death of one useful life. If the pimples are watery they dry up quickly, and when they are dried, the worship of the goddess is performed by the village gardener, who is supposed to be her hereditary retainer. He fills an earthen pot, the vase of which is covered with a small piece of red cloth, with blazing fire and a little vermilion, and this he circles round the head of the patient and takes it out of the village. All the cash he pockets, and the other things he takes away home. Next day young and unmarried girls, who are believed to be the representatives of the goddess, are worshipped and feasted by way of thanksgiving.

## XXI.—MALARIA.

The poisonous stench exhaling from damp places in the village, which propagates the breed of mosquitoes, invariably causes malaria to spread. Infection infests the neighbourhood and gathers virulence until it levies a heavy toll on the life of the people. The victims die a lingering death. At first the people pay no heed to this recurring fever until the sufferer is debilitated and incapacitated for work and his family starves, for it is on his incessant labour that the maintenance of his wife and children wholly depends. Shivering generally precedes an attack of malarial fever, and the patient wraps himself up in a blanket and lies down in the sun to warm himself. After a short while the shivering is past and the hot fit of fever comes on, the duration of which varies from a few hours to two or three days. The patient then drags himself into his hut. As soon as he is a little cool he is upon his legs again and resumes his work. But his sturdy physique soon gives way to the repeated attack of fever and he ultimately becomes unfit for heavy work. When the disease becomes chronic he tries to doctor himself and swallows potions of herbs and the bark of trees. When even this fails he is confined to bed and longs for medical help. But proper medical help is practically unavailable in rural areas.

The local physicians or "vaidyas" as they are called, who are really "the refuse of all other callings," prescribe medicines which often do more

harm than good. The intermittent fever becomes remittent, severer in intensity and longer in duration, and the loss of appetite partly caused by illness and partly by the knowledge of having nothing in the house, weakens the patient more. His pallid face, the hectic glow on his shrivelled cheeks, throbbing temples and darkened forehead, the distressing cough: all these speak the unrelieved agonies of a miserable existence, which oscillates between life and death. Impure air is all he breathes, and dirty water is the only draught he drinks. Inch by inch he descends into the valley of death, and the nearer he reaches the bottom the more is he tortured by the thoughts of his wife and children's gloomy future. If delirium sets in and the patient begins to rave, he is supposed to have incurred the displeasure of some evil spirit. Exorcists are at once sent for to cast out the evil spirit. They mutter incantations, inhale and noisily exhale long breaths, clear their throats, puff their cheeks up, swell or stretch their body, shut their eyes and open them again, and continue these antics to create the impression that they are struggling for mastery with a dreadful demon.

When this manœuvring is finished, preparations are made for a *puja* or worship which is generally offered in the night all alone by the exorcist either in some grove outside the village or at the crossing of two thoroughfares. A few yards of red cloth, a little vermillion, a cup of country wine and if possible, a cock or goat to sacrifice, are the offerings. A major portion of these the exorcist himself appropriates and the rest is either scattered on the ground or burnt in

the fire. Sometimes before this so-called Puja is half finished the patient is already in the dolours of death, and not long after it is over one earning member of the nation ceases to exist.

## XXII.—CHOLERA.

At the end of the rainy season cholera steals a march on the villages and the people are taken unawares. It silently works its way through the locality. Its ravages are remorseless and irresistible. The village people fall an easy prey to this scourge, and die like street dogs, uncared for and unlooked after. The pestilence seldom misses its mark. Flight from it is practically out of the question.

Where are the poor to go to? Nobody gives them refuge in his house and the trees may afford some shelter from the weather, but give no protection from this disease. Moreover, the village people superstitiously believe that to fly from an infected place is to incur the displeasure of the goddess of the infectious disease and that of the splay-footed evil spirits which are supposed to haunt the village at the time of an epidemic. Their clouded vision deludes them and they see moving figures of large bulk and wearing different shapes floating in the air, sometimes melting into the inane, at other times assuming clearer lineaments. The people refuse to stir abroad after dusk and a death-like silence reigns over the village from sunset to sunrise.

As soon as the first case of cholera occurs a subscription is raised for holding a public worship of the goddess. The requisite amount is collected by low caste women who, with a twig of a *neem* tree, jump and run and mutter strange



words; and the worship is performed by the professional gardener of the village who is considered to be the servant or henchman of the goddess.

And if even after the *puja* the epidemic shows no sign of abatement preparations are made on a larger scale to worship Raja Hardol, a historical figure, now popularly, though erroneously, called Hardeo Lala. It will not, perhaps, be out of place to mention succinctly who this personage was, what were his achievements and how he sacrificed his life to uphold and vindicate the honour of his elder brother's wife against the dishonourable suspicions and aspersions cast on her by her own husband.

During the reign of Shah Jahan, Jahan Lodi invaded the country and began to plunder. Intoxicated by a series of successes he came to Orchha, a small state in Bundelkhand, which was owned by Raja Jujhar Singh, who challenged him to a battle and bravely held his own against overwhelming odds. When the report reached the royal ears the Raja was, in recognition of his services, at once appointed the highest functionary of the southern provinces of the Empire. The Raja delegated his powers to his brother, Raja Hardol, and set out on a journey. The administration of the new Raja proved such a great success that within a very short time he became the idol of his people.

It so chanced that one day Qadir Khan, the famous gladiator of Delhi, visited Orchha, and insolently threw out a challenge for a match. A consultation was hurriedly held among the Orchha

people, and two champions, Kal Deo and Bhal Deo, were selected.

Both of them, turn by turn, got beaten and wounded owing to their sword's breaking. Now the Bundelas were smarting under the disgrace of this defeat, but they could hit upon no plan to wipe out the stain. At last Raja Hardol went to his elder brother's wife and begged her to let him have the sword of his brother who had left it in her keeping. "Qadir Khan's sword," said Raja Hardol, "has proved a gallant weapon, but that of my brother is better still."

The Rani recalled to her mind the request of her husband not to lend his sword to anybody, but she recollected also that the name of Orchha was dearer to her husband than his life itself, and argued that had he been here he would have certainly approved her decision of giving his sword to Hardol.

Her mind was made up and she handed over the sword to him. Next day Raja Hardol proved more than a match for Qadir Khan who, though he fought bravely, was ultimately beaten.

This was a day of universal rejoicing at Orchha.

By this time Raja Jujhar Singh was coming back home. Raja Hardol who had gone out to hunt in the forest came across his brother but could not at first recognise him. When however he did so he jumped down from his horse and threw himself at his brother's feet. His brother lifted him from the ground and affectionately held him in his arm.

They both returned to Orchha, which was resounding with praises of Raja Hardol. This made Raja Jujhar Singh envious.

To fan the fire there was a mistake made by the Rani, who in serving the dinner put the gold plate before Raja Hardol and a silver one before her own husband.

When they were alone together the Raja broke the silence and said that the Rani could only wash the stain from her honour with the blood of Hardol. She was thunder-struck to hear these words. She argued with him but could not make any impression on the mind of the Raja. This conversation was overheard by a maid of the Rani who communicated it to Raja Hardol. He at once went to his brother and said that he was quite prepared to go through any ordeal that might be suggested by him to vindicate the honour of the Rani. The Raja told him to take betel which was dipped in poison. Hardol readily took and chewed it. The poison was deadly, and it immediately darkened the features of Raja Hardol, on whose lips appeared the faint flicker of a heroic smile, which follows the supreme satisfaction of duty done at the cost of life.

The *pūja* has now degenerated into a meaningless practice, and is performed by illiterate persons who take the fullest advantage of this opportunity of filling their pocket. It is done in the night far from the village site by a process of erecting a mound and planting red flags on it.

The pen is at a loss to portray the scene when a poor man of the village is attacked by cholera. Lying in a thinly thatched, leaking cottage, shrouded

in the darkness of a rainy night, with no light either within or without, and with the wind shrilly shrieking around it and the rain falling in torrents overhead, he feels what the soul of tragedy itself can hardly feel. If we peep in we shall find a human being tossing on an uncarpeted cot. The cadaverous pallor of his face, the tired droop of his head, the distant and vacant look of his sunken eyes, the incoherent and indistinct muttering of his parched lips, all these speak of the agonies of death. He is only attended by his wife who occasionally gives him a drink of water and cleans the floor after each motion and vomit, the stinking odour of which lingers inside the cottage for a long time.

Sometimes his clothes are soiled and the sufferer finds himself in a veritable hell. The breathing gradually becomes harder and more difficult and at last it stops altogether, and when he does not answer the frequent calls of his wife she puts her hand to his nostrils and is faced with the terrible reality and falls in a fainting fit on the lifeless body of her husband.

The corpse remains unburied and is sometimes thrown unceremoniously into a ditch. The cremation of persons dead from cholera is not allowed by the village folk for fear of causing a spread of the disease.

### XXIII.—MEDICAL AID.

The lot of the poor people in villages is thrice cursed when they fall ill. Their poverty, their unhealthy and insanitary surroundings and the lack of medical facilities, all these combine to aggravate their misery. They cannot afford to give up their work until they are confined to bed. On their hard and untiring labour the maintenance of the whole family depends. It is more painful to them than their ailment to see their children piteously crying for food when there is nothing in the house to be given to them. Tears well up in their dim eyes, and in spite of their utmost effort to suppress them they run out and give a proof of the anguish and torture that the sick man has to bear over and above his physical sufferings. The little hoard of grain begins to dwindle and disappear and starvation is imminent. The situation is most distressing.

Their thatched hovels, only an excuse for houses, are situated so close to each other that the free passage of air is quite obstructed. After the first shower of rain, when the earth exudes the accumulated heat of summer, the atmosphere becomes stifling with the stinking and nauseating odour of the stagnant gutter, the water of which soaks into the earth deeper and deeper.

The heap of manure, which is guarded carefully against theft, steams up and warms the air, which smells most unpleasantly. The place where their team of oxen is kept becomes most filthy and

sodden with dung and water, and the ground is trodden into little pits. In ditches and pools the stagnant water becomes green with scum. In this the poor people wash their cooking utensils.

If we peep into the house we find the patient covered with dirty and tattered clothes, accommodated in a small and stuffy apartment in one corner of which lies a heap of loose grain the musty smell of which provides an additional torment. Not a single breath of fresh air can penetrate into the apartment to relieve its oppressiveness.

When the patient is quite unable to move about, the apothecaries and quacks of the village, generally some barber or some other equally crafty and talkative fellow, are consulted. When the medicines given by these medical men fail, exorcists are sent for to cast out the supposed influence of an evil spirit. They come and repeat their usual incantations and perform their accustomed antics and after lining their pockets take their way home.

Dispensaries are situated very far from each other and generally there is only one in each tahsil or sub-division of the district. The question of conveyance is a very difficult one. However a cart is borrowed and the patient is carried to the dispensary, jolting along all the way, and bearing the inclemency of the weather. There the doctor, maddened and distracted by overwork, just touches the pulse of the patient, and on the report of the attending member of the family, which is timidly made and inattentively heard, a prescription is written out. Further enquiries are answered with

red eyes and uncourteous words. After a weary interval of waiting, the medicine, which has lost almost all its efficacy by being old, is supplied to him. Sometimes it is only coloured water, bitter in taste and of absolutely no strength. The allotment of funds for medicines for each dispensary is quite inadequate.

The medicine does no good, and for the want of conveyance the sick man cannot go to the dispensary every day. He lingers on as long as vitality remains and then dies.

## XXIV.—EDUCATION.

The village schools, being not within easy reach, fail to draw the attention of parents of boys of school-going age. Look at the scene of a village school. In the morning the rustic boys hurriedly take a mouthful of stale food, kept overnight, and set out with their school-fellows each equipped with his ill-fashioned wooden slate, a big and misshapen earthen inkpot, a cracked reed pen and a torn book. Clad in ragged garments, and shivering with cold or burning in the heat, they have to traverse a long distance to attend the school. On the way they tarry long to frisk and frolic about, to quarrel, or to flight. They play pranks with wayfarers. They pelt stones or throw dust at one another. They climb up trees, and sometimes they fall down and break their bones. If they are late in reaching the school the teachers do not mind it, for fear the boys should give up their studies, and the enrolment suffer, for they know they will have to answer for such eventualities. Much consideration is shown to those boys to whom the teachers act as private tutors or from whose parents they receive presents. The teaching begins, and goes on till midday when there is a recess of two hours. The teachers go away to their lodging to take their meal, but the boys have nothing to refresh themselves with. At 2 p.m. the school assembles again. If a motor car or a cycle happens to pass in front of the school the boys, and sometimes the young teachers also, run



out to have a look at it. How can such teachers be expected to form the character of youth when their own character is in process of formation?

Towards the evening the boys are drilled. The drill is absolutely of no use. At sunset they get leave, and run back home which they reach a little before nightfall.

There is another way of imparting education in villages. Private persons, who have already tried several callings and failed, men like "discarded footmen, ruined pleaders, men who cannot work a sum in the rules of three, men who cannot write a common letter without flaw, men who do not know whether the earth is a sphere or a cube, men who do not know whether Jerusalem is in Asia or America," undertake the teaching of poor boys with the ostentatious purpose of doing good to the public. But in the innermost chamber of their heart selfishness reigns. The Brahmins and Muhammadans are generally the class to which these public-spirited men belong. The first work that the boys have to do is to sweep the room of the teacher and kindle a fire to fill his *chillum*. After these services have been rendered the work of teaching begins, and the rod plays its due part in the process. The rod is used unsparingly so that the children may not be spoilt. After an hour or so there is an interval. The boys fetch wood from the groves, draw water from a well and bring flowers for worship. If any of the boys demurs or murmurs he is taken to task and told that it is only such service that will bear fruit. The teacher takes his bath and artistically adorns his forehead and arms with sandal paste, and then

begins to tell his beads, though he does not mind interrupting the process in order to give silent orders to his pupils by means of gestures. However the *puja* is finished. After the meal is cooked and taken, the boys clean the cooking utensils and then perform the duty of shampooing the limbs of the teacher who takes a noonday nap. As soon as he falls asleep the boys are gone on errands of their own. When the school reassembles they come back, and again for an hour or so they receive lessons. Almost all day long they have to do some sort of service for the teacher or some work for his household. Neither attention is paid nor favour shown to boys from whose parents the *Guru Jee* (as he is reverentially styled) does not receive presents in cash or kind.

## XXV.—THE HOLI FESTIVAL.

The approach of the Holi season fills the villagers with lively anticipations. Their steps move more lightly, freed from the benumbing fetters of the cold, and the buoyancy of the vernal breeze fills their minds with thoughts of merriment. In the night after finishing their day's work they form groups and sing songs relating to the amorous frolics of the god Krishna with the cowherd maidens of Brindaban. These songs are a kind of rhapsody sung to the accompaniment of the drum and the cymbal. It is often difficult for educated people to follow the words, but no one can help feeling the thrill of emotion that vibrates through the tune. These singing parties are sometimes sedentary and sometimes peripatetic, and as they go their rounds they are often joined by neighbours who are also musically disposed at the moment. In these days however owing to the poverty that afflicts the village people these outbursts of joy are becoming less and less loud.

At last the expected day arrives. Around a castor plant, a plant which is planted on the first day of the spring season, heaps of straw, dry leaves and cow-dung cakes are piled up. The striplings of the village in the exuberance of their spirits make raids in the night upon the houses of their neighbours, and run off with whatever they can lay their hands upon—firewood, broken legs of beds, cart wheels, or bits of bamboo, and put it on the heap around the castor plant. The theft,

even if discovered, is not punished. Such pilferings are sanctioned by custom.

At the hour appointed by the village priest, the people assemble and go round the pile seven times, throwing linseed and barley plants into it. It is then set on fire either by a *Brahman* or by a *Pasi*, nowadays generally by the latter, who gets a dole of grain from the farmers at the time of reaping the harvest. The people turn their face away from the fire, for it is forbidden to see the first flame. But the youths look for a chance to escape the eyes of their elders and to have a glimpse of the first blazing of the pile, simply because they have been forbidden to do so. If the flames appear to be extending towards the south the village oracles prognosticate that the village will be visited by some pestilence. Before the pile is completely burnt down attempts are made to extinguish it, because it is considered an ill omen if the plant falls down during the conflagration. The burning pile is extinguished by the same person who sets fire to it. This is a troublesome task. Long bamboo poles are used to beat out the fire. Underneath the plant a few pice are buried, and these are the perquisite of the man who extinguishes the fire. Finally the people take fire from this smouldering heap and take it home, as something sacred.

This used to be the time for singing obscene songs. However the practice is becoming obsolete. The day following is a day of revelry. From early morning a huge crowd of boys is seen throwing coloured water on all passers-by. The higher the sun rises the more the contagion spreads. The

young people followed even by those who are far removed from youth, become intoxicated with hilarity. The crowd moves about from door to door in the village and its numbers increase at every step of the march. The whole village begins to resound with laughter and coarse jests. This goes on till midday. After that the people repair to their homes to take their bath and to wash away the stains from their hands and feet.

In the afternoon they put on gay clothes and embrace one another with affection, sinking their differences for the time being. During these civilities they besmear each other's face or forehead with a coloured powder called *abeer* as a token of good wishes. They give and receive visits and entertain each other according to their means. After this conviviality the village priest reads in the evening the new almanac's prognostications to the people; and if it be one of the prophecies that the fields will yield a rich harvest and that it will rain when needed, the audience feels supremely satisfied. The priest takes what he gets for his fee and with the customary benedictions quits the scene.

In the night the people do their best to have a hearty meal. This is the ambition of all but the realization of the few. There are many who get nothing but the same coarse stuff as they eat every day and even their number is not negligible who do not break their fast even on the Holi.

## XXVI.—THE DEWALI FESTIVAL.

The approach of the Dewali is a stimulus to the people to turn their attention to the cleaning of their houses. After the rains they require repairing and plastering. This keeps the owners busy for several days. At last their dwellings put on a neat and smart appearance. The advent of this great festival fills also gamblers with eager expectation of good games and good gains.

The day before the Dewali is called Narak-chaudas. It is superstitiously believed that on this day and for the next two evil spirits roam about and attempt to do harm. As a charm against their influence the women make a garland of garlic and put this round the neck of their children. A tuft of their hair is at the same time besmeared with wax. Cowdung lamps are placed in latrines.

The next is a day of general rejoicing. On the top of houses rows of small earthen lamps are placed in the evening and they are lighted just as it gets dark. The sight is fascinating. But this practice is now waning. The pinch of poverty is now keenly felt in rural areas.

At the time appointed by the village priest the male members of the house light from the old family lamp big rolls of straw which they carry out of their houses with shouts of triumph, in the belief that they are banishing trouble and misfortune out of their dwellings. At several places in a village these lighted rolls of straw are thrown

away and flame up in a big blaze. The people return home and receive benedictions from their superiors and elders. The eyelids of the children are blackened with soot, an old custom believed to be a protection against evil spirits. Well-to-do persons, particularly members of the trading community, worship their gold ornaments, regarding these as a symbol of the goddess of wealth. The *pundits* are engaged in reciting the "Gopal Sahasra Nam," a book containing the thousand different names of the god Vishnu, with the hope and belief that Lakshmi, who is mythologically represented as the consort of Vishnu, will undoubtedly come to hear the names of her lord and master, and it is for the same reason that the houses are swept clean. In the night every house becomes a gambling den where people of different degrees of moral depravity assemble to have a game. A crowd of boys find their way there and stake pice given to them by their parents. There wine is freely drunk and before long the company is fuddled and intoxicated.

The merry-makers are served by hangers-on who hope to get something from the fortune of the winners. Every attention is paid to the winner as long as he wins, and the moment he begins to lose he is neglected. Even the old and the sick come out to indulge in gambling. People bring their children to play for them, being themselves under an oath administered to them by their wives not to play any longer themselves. The gambling booth is an arena of trickery, treachery and often of tragedy. Heady with success and flushed with wine the gamblers fall to quarrelling, and the

company breaks up in a rout and reassembles at some other place at another hour.

The following day is not an important one. The next one is a day of worship for women and for members of the Kayastha community. The former worship their brothers and make them eat flattened and parched rice and sweets which are artistically made of different shapes. It is a great trouble to them if they happen to be brotherless. They worship even make-believe brothers. The sisters get more money than they spend over presents. The Kayasthas worship their pens as symbols of their traditional profession as writers, and use them again after three days.



## XXVII.—VILLAGE FAIRS.

There is a stir in quiet village life, particularly in the lower strata of society, when the time of a fair draws near. It is the younger women of the house who, backed by the children, take the leading part in preparing for the celebration. They try every means in their power to induce the elder folk to permit them to go to the fair, and if it happens to be a religious fair the old women are not less alert and active in asserting their claims to join the party. Even if it be an ordinary fair they do not like to remain behind out of lurking jealousy for their daughters-in-law. When the men of the house are obdurate in refusing permission they use their last and invariably effective weapon of hypocritical tears. They give up their food and starve themselves as a means of enforcing permission. At last they win. Money is somehow procured for the expenses of the journey for which preparations are hurriedly made. Parched barley ground into flour is put into a cloth bag to serve for food with a flavouring of unrefined sugar. The women put on their trinkets and their best clothes. Now the party is ready to start. There are only three ways of performing the journey,—on foot, by cart or by train. If the party consists of people of advanced age the idea of travelling on foot is abandoned; but if they do travel on foot the bundles of requisites are borne by women on their head and the children are carried by the men on their back secured by a

wrapper or a broad cotton band. If the journey is undertaken by cart it is comparatively comfortable. In the exuberance of their spirits the women sing songs to the accompaniment of drums to relieve the tedium of the way. The cart is driven by an elderly man of the party, who being engaged in smoking cannot often control the team of bullocks. The beasts shy and start and unyoke themselves and the poor travellers sometimes roll out of the cart while driving over uneven ground. At mid-day there is a halt. The team of oxen is fed and watered. The men of the party take their bath and gulp down the barley flour kneaded in water, and resume their journey.

A railway journey is the most uncomfortable of all. The first difficulty is to buy the ticket, the next to rush one's way to the platform through the thick crowd, and the worst, to find a seat in the overcrowded train. The policeman is the ruler everywhere. He is coaxed and cajoled and sometimes his palms are greased to induce him to let the passengers go to the booking-window or on to the platform or into a compartment full to the ceiling. There is a great hubbub all round. Somehow at last the party squeeze themselves into a goods wagon or a horse box and are packed in. Even in a dog box people have been seen traveling. The train starts and the crowd of passengers burst into a pious shout or cheerful strain of rustic song.

On reaching their destination their first care is to look for a place of encampment. In a crowded grove of trees they clear a small piece of ground and occupy it. They lie huddled together for the

sake of security. Sometimes they cook a meal, consisting of lumps of kneaded flour baked on a cow-dung fire, and sometimes they content themselves with their ready-made meal of parched gram. Petty thefts are often committed in these groves owing to the darkness and the absence of protection. The party wakes up much before the break of day and prepares for the holy bath for which they have come. The streets are crowded already and the rush of people wending their way to the sacred stream or tank, as the case may be, has already begun. If any one falls to the ground by accident as the result of a rush he is soon trodden to death. After much struggling the river bank is reached, and the crowd shout again to hail the sight. The young people plunge into the water at once, the older ones stand shivering on the bank for a while. The women go up to the waist into the water, soothing their conscience with a sprinkling of the water on their head and shoulders.

All about the banks are knots of priests going up and down among their clients, wheedling them into offerings of greater and greater value and giving them promises of a higher and higher heaven after death. They recite the usual formula before receiving their gifts, and sometimes they leave the ceremony to itself and greedily grab what is offered. The gift consists of grain or cash or clothing, and sometimes the rich give away cattle and gold.

If a temple happens to be near there is a stream of visitors from the tank to the temple into which entrance is impossible, except for the rich or

lucky, so the majority of the visitors only throw flowers and sweets before the idol from a distance and walk away.

From there they go to the market. Here they are first attracted by the sports and amusements scattered everywhere, and sometimes they lose all the money they have in the first diversion they encounter. It is one of the easiest jobs to swindle a rustic pilgrim, and when this happens the problem of returning home becomes acute indeed, and the poor pilgrim has to turn a beggar for the time being and procure by begging the wherewithal to return home.

## XXVIII.—THE VILLAGE MARKET.

In villages there are no standing markets but only floating markets, and these are held twice a week. On a market day there is a noticeable stir in the smooth current of village life. Petty traders and grain dealers are alert and active. They take their bath early and rush through their meal, and set out on their journey to the market place. The inclemency or the severity of weather makes no difference to them. They form themselves into parties and divide their merchandise into portable loads, carrying these on their head or back, or else on pack ponies or bullocks. Big grain dealers employ carts drawn by bullocks. With these loads they travel fast enough to meet the earliest customer.

As the day declines a stream of idlers and loiterers pours in. They have no purchase to make and no business to transact. They come merely to ramble about and to propagate all sorts of malicious gossip. They dog the footstep of every newcomer and if they fail to gain his ears they desert him and cling to another. In their aimless strolling they visit every shop and make persistent inquiries after the prices, as if they were going to buy large stocks. They are therefore warmly welcomed everywhere, but everywhere they express dissatisfaction with the quality of the stuff exhibited for sale and walk away to the next stall, repeating the same trick until they are known. These people manage to form themselves into knots and groups

for the convenience of talking together. They smoke freely, and when they pass a woman they laugh lasciviously.

Contrasted with these idlers are the regular business men who move briskly about and talk and haggle in dead earnest until they strike a bargain, and after making a few paltry purchases they hastily quit the place.

Next you mark those who come to the market to purchase the commodities of daily life. They go about from booth to booth, and after inquiring the prices they buy what they need. If they come across friends and acquaintances they speak to them for a while and show their purchases to them to assure themselves that they have not been cheated. Older people, who have generally become inveterate smokers or tobacco-chewers, exchange their grain for tobacco. The young folk buy vegetables, the women purchase kerosine oil and other household requisites. They always seize an opportunity of cheating their husbands and misappropriating a few pice for their own private use. The children make the air ring with sharp cries whenever they see toys. Unless they get what they want, they become refractory, cross and obstinate. No amount of cajoling or coaxing can satisfy them, and at last they are slapped into silence.

Last come the misers of the neighbourhood who linger till the last moment. They tramp about from shop to shop, taking samples of everything but never buying anything. They are soon recognised and hailed with derision, which however they do not mind as long as their pockets are

untouched. At last they buy what no one else would look at—the rotten, moth-eaten, mildewed, mouldy stuff of every department. Cheapness is their watchword, whatever be the quality.

If a robbery happens to have been lately committed in the vicinity and the police have not been able to trace the robbers, they come to disperse the market much before its usual time of closing lest there should be a recurrence of the crime. Both the shopkeepers and the visitors are forcibly driven away. This is a great loss to the parties concerned, but the rural police regard it as conducive to peace; and perhaps they are quite right, as security of life and poverty is preferable to brisk business.

## XXIX.—BIRTHS.

The period of pregnancy is not a period of relief from household duties to women in villages: the same amount of labour and the same nature of work has still to be done even when the woman is near her time. Very little consideration is shown to the would-be mother. Slackness in any detail of the daily routine of work brings upon her head the wrath of her mother-in-law or sister-in-law, the latter being the most difficult relation to deal with. If the would-be mother complains of fatigue, she is blamed for not taking the usual quantity of food; and if she keeps up her wonted vigour, which is very rarely the case, she is accused of devouring excessive quantities of food, consuming the household provisions at a rate likely to bring on starvation. There are some superstitions forecasting the sex of the expected baby. If the expecting mother sleeps soundly, the old women prognosticate the birth of a girl, but if she does not feel well and her eyes appear sunk in their sockets, even though this be due to the lack of proper nourishment and rest, which is almost invariably the case, the women of the family entertain the hope of welcoming a male child. If a woman bears no child for a few years after marriage, she is threatened with the second marriage of her husband, and both in season and out of season she is offensively abused as a barren woman. This appellation is considered nothing short of a curse. With eyes full of tears, and a heart full of anguish, she suffers all this in silence.



If on the contrary she bears a multiplicity of children, the treatment meted out to her is equally heartless. She is likened to a bitch. In this case even the husband comes in for a fair share of vulgar attack and ridicule. But in the presence of neighbours the women of the house wear a mask of hypocrisy and declare that nobody can have enough of children, and that the more prolific the progeny the luckier is the family. Now when the day arrives and when the expecting mother is in labour, the whole house is in confusion; all other work comes to a standstill. The commanding voice of the mother-in-law and the snarling murmurs of the sister-in-law accompany the performance of duties preparatory to the expected confinement. The worst room in the cottage is cleared to serve as a confinement room. If a girl is born, there is much disappointment and chagrin. There is no music and no singing. The neighbours depart home quickly with morose looks. There are no ceremonies and no rejoicings: the house goes into mourning as it were. The new-made mother is left to herself with little or no attendance. Nobody takes care to minister to her wants. If she requires a drink, a wash or a napkin, she has to crawl for it as best she may. It often happens that the birth takes place in an open field or on the roadside, and the mother with her infant in her arms walks back home within an hour or two of the birth. Let us see in what condition she lives if the delivery takes place within the house. A tattered mattress is her bed; a quilt, which is past mending, is her wrapper, which she has to share with her baby; only a few morsels of the coarsest

food is all she gets to eat. She is confined in a corner of the hut in the midst of faggots or cow-dung cakes loosely heaped up around. All her dirty linen and other filth are collected at the same spot for a certain number of days. A smouldering fire is kept burning at the entrance of the hut or the confinement room as a sort of disinfectant. Fresh air is sedulously shut out. What wonder is there if infant mortality in the villages is heavy?

If either the mother or the baby falls ill, death is almost a foregone conclusion. If the child happens to be a daughter, nobody feels any anxiety for the illness. No medical aid is available in villages; but even if it were available, where is the cost of it to come from? In some cases in spite of the will there is no way to procure medical aid. In a couple of days the infant dies, and nobody, except the poor mother, feels any the worse for the loss. The father is the only other person affected with grief, but if he mourns in a visible manner, he is supposed to offend society. "Mourning for a poor girl!" they say. After disposing of the dead body the inmates of the house take a bath and make haste to forget the whole incident. With the death of the child, the period of confinement, of rest, or, to speak more correctly, of immunity from work, comes to an end, and again the same round of household duties has to be gone through and the same heartless treatment undergone.

The birth of a male child, if the house is not already swarming with kiddies, is a quite different event. The blushing smiles of the father, the jovial voice of the grandfather, the tears of joy

of the grandmother and the loud mirth of the other members of the family prove the profound satisfaction felt at the event. On the sixth day after birth a ceremony is performed, and only after this is the child allowed the use of a tailored garment made of the cloth already used by the head of the family. Part of the ceremony consists in presenting something to the infant's aunt, and it is probably in consequence of this that the sister-in-law feels well disposed towards her brother's wife for a few days, for otherwise the constant warfare between these two is a matter for proverb. This sixth day is supposed to be the most critical day in the fortunes of the new-born baby. Nobody goes to sleep that night. They bring in a kid and constantly twist his ears to keep it bleating, as this is believed to scare away any evil spirit which may have gained entrance into the house. On the twelfth day there is another ceremony—religious in conception but festive in practice, if circumstances permit. In the first month the mother is allowed to have a bath on the days fixed by the village priest, which usually are the fifth, ninth and twenty-first days.

Now let us have a look at the other side of the picture. If the mother falls ill, some anxiety is felt in the house, not because she is a member of the house, but because she feeds the baby of the house. Even if she dies it is no matter, for before the fire of the funeral pile is extinguished, proposals are set on foot for the second marriage of the widower. However the matter becomes serious, when with the ill-health of the mother, the child too begins to show signs of indisposition.

There is nobody to detect the symptoms of disease until it is too late. After cursing the mother for falling ill so inopportunately, the people turn their attention to find what medical aid is available in the neighbourhood. Now it is the old women of the house or the neighbourhood who take the case in hand and administer drugs, but only to make the case worse. When they fail, as they do fail in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, they declare that the child is under the influence of some evil spirit, and then exorcists are sent for. Sometimes before the tricks and jugglery begin, the mother and child are at their last gasp, and all is over.

### XXX.—CRIMES.

There are three sorts of crime that are common in villages, and these are committed in three different seasons of the year and with three different motives. First, some crimes are committed for the sake of vengeance for private wrongs. Incendiarism, and the cutting away of another man's crops come under this head. Petty thefts, which are of common occurrence, constitute the second class. Dacoity and murder are the third class. The season for the first kind of crimes is the dry season, April to June. To set houses, barns and haystacks on fire, or to cut away the standing crops from a field, are offences generally committed during the months of April, May and June. The rainy season is the most congenial time for theft and house-breaking. Noises are drowned in the patter of rain and the cloudy skies intensify the darkness of night. May and June are unfavourable, because of the short nights and the sleepless heat. Nor is winter any the more favourable, because the people sleep inside the house with all the doors and windows barred. Some of them spend the night in keeping watch over their crops or sitting beside a fire to keep themselves warm. The wet weather induces sleep and the easterly wind prolongs and deepens the night's rest for those who have been toiling the livelong day. For serious crimes there is no particular season. The motive that leads to the commission of crimes of the first class, is often pure malice. The second

class of crimes are committed not with any deliberate intention, but often on the impulse of a moment, owing to the sudden arising of an opportunity.

"How oft the sight of means to do ill deeds  
Makes deeds ill done!"

During a season of famine or scarcity the motive for theft is escape from starvation. Dacoity may be looked upon as a magnified theft. It is premeditated and well thought out in every detail. The motive for it is deep-seated. The pettiest crimes are very seldom detected. For various reasons people do not report them to the police. In the first place the reporting of a theft sometimes involves more expense than the value of the goods stolen. Next, the visits of the Police to the scene of the theft are so frequent and so vexatious that they cause more loss in time than the worth of the articles lost. Then again, the report of a theft often recoils on the complainant, for the "thanedar saheb" (this is the name by which the Sub-Inspector of Police is called) when he fails to find a clue to the culprit, sometimes turns round on the complainant and makes the accuser himself the accused. The man who reported the crime is said to have cut his own crops or sold his own grain, as the case may be, to involve some enemy of his in trouble. This is quite a common trick of the village Sub-Inspector whenever it is inconvenient for him to make a diligent investigation, and in nine cases out of ten he is successful in his trick. It does not need long for a poor simple villager to come under the mesmeric influence of a stern, furious-looking man,

dressed in khaki uniform, uttering mouthfuls of oaths and curses, and behaving with the utmost rudeness to everyone. Wherever he appears to make an investigation, the people hastily bring out a cot and offer him a seat, and he is immediately surrounded by a number of flatterers and hangers-on who nod assent to every statement he makes, and stand ready to carry out his behests zealously. Standing at a respectful distance are a posse of constables and chaukidars, and a little farther a miscellaneous crowd of spectators. The unfortunate man whose complaint is being inquired into is sitting on the ground with folded hands just in front of the "thanedar," answering the latter's questions in the softest tone to carry the impression of injured innocence and to move the stony heart of the "thanedar saheb". He cringes submissively and craves for mercy. The "thanedar saheb" only laughs a sarcastic laugh and utters threats and curses in a severe style. After some time a whispered conversation between him and some of his attendants ensues, and the gist of it they communicate to the accused in a low whisper. The poor man is visibly moved; he cannot possibly accept the proposal: he has no means of meeting the *huzoor's* wishes, but he knows that if he cannot he will incur the displeasure of the police officer. He is in a fix. He can say neither "no" nor "yes." He therefore falters in speech and speaks in enigmas. The "thanedar saheb" bursts into rage and pours out a volley of abuse. In a moment he calms down and resumes negotiation which ends in some kind of settlement which seems to please neither party. But the best part of it is that the

"thanedar saheb" departs with his retinue and there is an end at least of this evil. The whole village heaves a sigh of relief, and the tongue of gossip is let loose again.

After painful experience of the investigation of offences by the police, the village people have grown wiser. They now report offences to the zemindar who, after satisfying himself that the report is true, gives a decree in favour of the complainant and directs the village chaukidar to make good the loss. This functionary annually receives as a perquisite five seers of grain per bigha, two and half seers of grain on festival days and a rupee in cash every alternate year. Of course local custom varies. In return for these gifts he performs the duty of going round the village and the fields. If any theft is committed, or if the crops are cut or burnt or any other thing of the sort happens it is he who is responsible.

For the crimes classed under the second heading the rainy season, as already noted, is the usual time. It is in this season that the hardest agricultural work has to be done, and the moist heat coupled with the heavy toil of the day causes utter exhaustion, to recoup which Nature provides heavy sleep—sleep which is rendered heavier by the gentle patter of rain, the rustling of the breeze and the musical croaking of frogs collected in pools. Thieves prowl about a village in groups of four or five. Walking as noiselessly as possible they first stand at the back of the house they want to break into, and if they hear no sound within they infer that the inmates are all asleep, and then they move forward to the front door. Here they sometimes



notice some elderly male member of the house sleeping under a shed. Passing quietly by his head or foot they push at the door, but if they find it bolted, they abandon the attempt to break through the door and go to some side wall into which they try to cut a hole. If in the course of this they hear a cough or a hem, they pause, and when all is silence again they resume their operation. They are generally cowards, but if driven to bay they fight desperately. They have a special implement for cutting such holes and they work pretty fast with it. In an hour's time they cut a hole wide enough for a man to crawl through, but they do not use this hole for egress. Once inside the house, every door is at their command, and they keep open one or more of these for quick flight, if there is danger of being caught. Through one of these doors they escape with their booty. The whole gang however does not enter the house. Some keep watch outside the house at different points. It sometimes happens that some woman of the household is awakened by the presence of the thieves, but she has not the courage to raise an alarm for fear of being strangled by one of the ruffians. If a man of the house happens to wake up before the thieves have run away, the thief is either easily caught or there is a free fight which may result in the victory of either party. *Lathis* are used and the thief's legs are aimed at first, so that he may fall down and be easily caught. It is only when a thief is actually caught that a theft is reported to the police; otherwise the village *chaukidar* has to trace the culprit or failing to catch him, to make good the loss caused by the

theft. But the chaukidar is a shrewd fellow and by instinct and habit he knows more things than many others learn by education. By means of foot-prints and by the clue obtained from the things which the burglars throw away as useless the chaukidar is often successful in tracing the thieves. But such discoveries lead to nothing in the absence of positive proofs. There are other petty crimes, such as lifting cattle, stealing goats and sheep, etc., but these are seldom reported to the police. On the other hand a team of oxen is more valuable in a village than a railway line. If a team is stolen, and the owner finds no clue to the theft in the neighbouring villages he does report the matter to the police.

Serious crimes like dacoity and murder cause a deep stir in the smoothly flowing life of a village and produce a disquieting effect for months. When one of these crimes has been committed nobody stirs out of the house after sunset. There is a regular panic in the village. The crime is at once brought to the notice of the police, who take up the inquiry with all their zeal and energy for fear of losing their reputation. In dacoity, the gang often come equipped with weapons and fire-arms, and the poor rustics have nothing to defend themselves with. They resist for a time with *lathis*, but are soon overpowered. What resistance can *lathis* offer against muskets? Money-lenders who are the eyesore of the village and grocers, who are unduly strict in their business dealings, are generally the victims chosen by these dacoits. These people are proverbially cowards, and being unpopular they receive help from no one

even in a matter of life and death. Dacoities are generally committed either in the small hours of the morning or just after sunset. The latter gives the gang ample time to get far from the scene. Dacoits are often not content with plunder: they commit all sorts of atrocities—murder, house-burning, rape—for the mere satisfaction of committing them. They put the inmates of the house to torture to force them to divulge where the wealth of the house is hidden. They sometimes wear masks and false beards to disguise their identity and to give them a more ferocious look. A dacoity is of rare occurrence compared with a theft, but it shakes the easy course of village life for months and years afterwards.

### XXXI.—MARRIAGES.

The negotiation and settlement of marriages in rural areas is no easy problem. Many barriers are to be surmounted and many pitfalls to be avoided. One of the chief causes of early marriage is the belief of the people that a girl should be given in marriage before the age of puberty. From the very birth of a female child the father considers himself no longer a free man and, of course, he does bear a heavy obligation. To meet it, he saves every little sum he can. He humorously styles his child a mercantile bill in allusion to the dowry that must be paid at her marriage. While the child is still very young the women of the house begin to clamour for the settlement of her marriage. At first her relatives pay little or no heed to the suggestion, but when the child grows to eight or nine years of age the father has to think seriously of her marriage. Common prudence likewise dictates early action.

In days gone by the work of finding out a suitable match for a boy or girl was entrusted to the village barber who, although cunning and crafty in every other pursuit, discharged this duty in a thoroughly honest manner. In these days, the easy means of communication, the spread of education, the springing up of regular match-making associations and agencies have changed the whole complexion of the question. But in the old days the barber played a most prominent part in matrimonial negotiations, and it was often his

fortune to suffer the curse of both parties if anything went wrong at the time of the alliance or subsequently. But he has never been known to betray the trust reposed in him in this matter.

The question of dowry is the most thorny question in a marriage negotiation, and it is generally approached in this manner. After some preliminary talk some male member of the family, who is younger in age and of a lower generation than the would-be bride, goes with the barber to the bridegroom's house to settle the question of dowry. In unenlightened circles the dowry is dealt with in the spirit of a commercial transaction. Demands are put up and offers made, and there is higgling and haggling over petty details. In these conversations the agent of the bride's party is treated in a most shabby manner and the representatives or relations of the bridegroom make pretensions and assume airs in a most disgusting fashion, as if the bridegroom were a prince and the bride a beggar maid. The one party speaks with the utmost humility and the other with the grossest arrogance. The younger members are more difficult to deal with than the older ones. When an appeal is made to them to intervene in the matter they at once declare that nothing could be more abhorrent to their sentiments than the idea of putting up a boy to auction in the marriage market, but that they were helpless as the final decision rests with the grey heads of the house. But what do the grey heads do? They shuffle, they speak ambiguously, they prevaricate. The negotiations are prolonged and in many cases embittered. Sometimes the overtures come to a standstill.

Now again appeals are made to the aged folk of the house, and after some whispers and some smiles they climb down a step or two and ask for a slightly lower sum than they had originally demanded, but probably they still ask for a sum of money which they have never possessed in any generation. They cite instances of the past, they quote scripture and declare that the dowry system is sanctioned both by usage and religion, and that the abrogation of it would be sinful for both parties. The gift of a bride is the most valuable of earthly gifts, and no gift is valid unless it is accompanied by a present in cash. The higgling process continues, and much eloquence is brought to bear on the question by both parties. Neighbours sometimes act as middlemen in these transactions and oftener than not they only muddle matters.

If a settlement is finally arrived at, well and good, otherwise the bride's party comes back home disappointed. Sometimes even after settlement a proposed alliance is broken off if the village priest, who is the oracle of the village and whose word is law and faith, happens to declare that the horoscopes of the bride and bridegroom do not tally with each other. The village priest is sometimes entirely under the thumb of the landlord and dare not express opinions likely to be prejudicial to the interests of his overlord, and in such cases he salves his conscience by adopting a Delphic ambiguity of expression. Even after the horoscope question is settled there are many difficulties ahead. A suitable date has to be fixed; ornaments and clothes have to be got ready; distant kinsfolk have to be informed and invited; structures have to be

erected; foodstuffs have to be collected. Now is the time for back-biters and mischief-makers to play their part. Anonymous letters pour in, vague hints are dropped, and similar other means are adopted to induce the parties to break off the proposed alliance. Sometimes this is done from motives of self-interest—because the mischief-makers have proposals of their own to put forward; sometimes it is the outcome of pure malice.

However after steering clear of all such rocks and shoals preparations are set on foot for the celebration of the marriage. The first step is to borrow money at an exorbitant rate of interest by mortgaging some fields or pawning some of the women's jewellery. A whole round of ceremonies—some religious, others social or domestic or merely traditional—are gone through before the marriage, and there is feasting and mirth at each. The marriage ceremony as a rule is performed at night at an hour determined by astrological calculation. The bridegroom party arrives at the bride's house the same day. It consists of a miscellaneous crew besides the bridegroom's near relations and friends—village friends, leisured neighbours, feasting gossips, and camp followers. The more respectable of these travel in country carts drawn by a pair of famished oxen who are constantly goaded and urged on their way with cudgels and curses. Camels and elephants too sometimes accompany a marriage procession—emblems of borrowed splendour, unbecoming the real position and dignity of either party but adding to the burdens of the bride's father and contributing not a little to his financial collapse. The clothes worn

by most members of the party and particularly the gay finery and ornaments of the bridegroom are likewise borrowed. Particular care has therefore to be taken by each person that the borrowed feathers are not soiled in the journey or lost or mishandled during the stay at the bride's place, and this scrupulous care often betrays the secret of the borrowing. The bridegroom's father or guardian is the leader of the procession and the knight commander of his party. All the time his mind is absorbed in the eager expectation of receiving a dowry. The young folk in the party are the merriest lot. They spend their time in loud laughing and chat. Some of them ride on ponies and make them prance and curvet to exhibit their skill in horsemanship in the eyes of the lads and lasses of the villages through which they pass. And they are indeed admired for their flaunting head-dress gaudily coloured, and for their jaunty style of riding. It oftens happens that in their self-admiration they forget that they are on horseback, and down they tumble on the ground whenever a hedge or a fence has to be passed. And there are bursts of laughter all around, and much swearing and cursing on the part of the gallant riders.

The bridegroom is generally borne in a palanquin carried in the centre of the procession. He wears a loose robe of saffron colour tied with a girdle round the waist. His head-dress is a turban of the same colour from which hang ornamental tassels in front of his face. In the same palanquin with him sits his younger brother or cousin dressed in similar gay attire who acts as the best man to



the bridegroom. If trousers are worn they are of scarlet colour wound in folds round the legs. The shoes are of light brocade and the stockings of crimson silk. The bridegroom's forehead is sometimes decorated with tiny spots made of sandal paste arranged in the shape of foliage and flowers. His eyelids are streaked with lampblack (*kajal*) to make them look larger and more beautiful. He wears round his wrists a pair of bangles and earrings in his ears. Altogether he is a picture of the classical god Hymen.

Before the bridegroom starts from his home he has to perform a curious little ceremony. A small earthen vessel is placed on the ground, bottom upwards, and he has to go round it seven times and finally smash it with a kick. If in this act his foot slips or he fails to smash the vessel he is laughed at by the surrounding kinsfolk and friends, but superstitious people regard this as an unlucky omen.

The arrival of the marriage party at the bride's house causes a stir and commotion. The bride's relations and friends go out to receive them and put them up in the shed erected for this purpose. Every arrangement is made for their comfort, but it is still impossible to please them, because some of them come with the determined purpose of showing their displeasure at everything in order to pose as gentlemen of wealth and means accustomed to all sorts of luxury at home. The bride's relations however patiently put up with all bursts of petulance from members of the bridegroom's party who occupy a privileged position. No one dare speak a word of contradiction or

disagreement; no one dare challenge the word of a *Barati* (a member of the bridegroom's party). Every remark must be quietly listened to; every insult meekly borne; every behest zealously carried out. There is an old saying that every member of a bridegroom party is under the influence of twelve evil spirits; the bridegroom himself is animated by sixteen, his father by eighty. The demands they make upon the bride's father, the services they expect from him, the commands they give out to him almost justify the belief in this demoniac influence. If there are two hundred men in the marriage party they will ask for rations sufficient for double the number.

A little before the hour of marriage the whole party starts in procession from the lodging place for the house of the bride. Dim flickering torches smoke by the way and rockets fly up and shells burst at frequent intervals along the route. The ceremony itself is quite simple. After worshipping the god Ganesha a cash present, the amount of which varies according to the means of the bride's father, is offered to the bridegroom. Thus are the foundations of unpleasantness well and truly laid. Grumbles of dissatisfaction at the inadequacy of the amount are heard on all sides among the bridegroom's party. The bridegroom is taken inside the house while the other members of the party return to the camp, take their meals, and sit down to enjoy the singing and dancing provided for their entertainment. Dancing girls sometimes accompany the bridegroom's party. The performance of the marriage ceremony takes place at the appointed hour. The giving away of a girl in marriage is

one of the most sacred and meritorious acts in the Hindu religion. The father and mother both keep a fast that day until the ceremony is over. After that there is a series of ceremonies which have to be gone through, and an excited vigil is kept up the whole night. The bridegroom comes back to the marriage camp outside in the morning. The nearest relatives of the bridegroom are invited to take their meals in the house of the bride in the night, the others being served their meals in the camp. But it is not a simple matter for the bridegroom's relations to go to the bride's house for their meals. Much coaxing and cajoling is needed to induce them to rise from their seats; much further coaxing to persuade them to put a morsel into their mouth, and the process has to be kept up during the whole meal, and even then the food actually eaten is only nominal in quantity, as it is supposed to be bad form to eat much on an occasion like this. These blandishments take several hours and it is daybreak before the meal is actually over. During the course of the meal, the female neighbours of the bride's house sing obscene songs. The bridegroom blushes in the presence of his elders and keeps his head hung down. When the meal is over the party gathers together to enjoy the dancing which goes on perpetually. The third day of the marriage is a difficult day. To this day's banquet a larger number of guests are invited than on any previous day. When the food is served the guests remain motionless. They look towards the bridegroom, for it is he who should begin. But his modesty ties his hands and seals his mouth. When repeated

requests are made he hints that he must receive a fee before he agrees to dine. The fee is named but the amount is generally beyond the means of the bride's family. However all the members of the bride's family and even the guests give some presents, and if these are accepted all ends well, but if not, the bridegroom and his party go back home leaving the dishes untouched, and without taking the bride with them.

If nothing untoward of this sort happens the members of the bride's family go to pay a formal visit to the bridegroom party. Courtesies are exchanged and then there is a formal leave-taking. This is generally done on the day when the party return home with the bride. The parting of the bride from her parents is really a pathetic scene. A girl of eight or nine years of age who is practically tied to the apronstrings of her mother, whose horizon has never extended beyond the four walls of her village home and whose heart is trembling to think of the tyranny of her mother-in-law which she will have to bear, she weeps long and bitterly and has literally to be torn away from her parents. When she arrives at her father-in-law's house she is formally welcomed by her mother-in-law and has to go through certain ceremonies. Every thing that the bride has brought from home,—the cash, the jewellery, the clothing, the utensils and the sweets, is carefully examined before the guests and commented upon, and in this even the menial servants freely take their part. If any of these things is not approved, the bride's father and mother are not only abused but cursed. This process may actually go on for years together, until another

marriage has taken place in the house and supplies a fresh subject to talk about. It has often happened that in default of full payment of the dowry agreed upon the bride has been sent back to her parents and separated for life from her home and husband. Either she puts an end to her existence or leads a life without a ray of hope. For her sake the father runs into debt but only to buy lifelong misery.

## XXXII.—THE VILLAGE PATWARI, THE CHAUKIDAR AND THE MUKHIYA.

Speaking in architectural language we may call the village Patwari the corner-stone of the superstructure of civil administration. Do away with him and the whole revenue administration of a province will collapse. This low-paid but high functionary is a power in the land. He wields great influence, and every one in a village, from a big zamindar down to a common tiller of the soil, is in perpetual dread and awe of him. In outward demeanour he is meek and humble, and full of soft words, but in his dealings he is very difficult to please. His moods are as varying as the turns of the weather. If he cherishes ill-will against anybody there is no escape for his victim, but even if he is friendly towards anyone he will do no good to him unless his palm is well greased. Thus it is that this man has got no friend but a host of enemies. It is, therefore, a common saying that between the appearance of a sinner and a Patwari there is but little difference. His extreme unpopularity is no doubt due to his insolent behaviour, and for this he is often belaboured or cruelly disfigured in the face. His nose is the organ that generally pays the entire penalty for his misdeeds. Whenever you come across a noseless individual in the village streets, you may take it for granted that the man is either a Patwari or a debauchee.

The Patwari's dress is a short tunic coming down to the waist, fastened with bands at the neck

and on the chest, at one side of which there is a slit exposing one of his breasts. For head-dress he sometimes puts on a cap and sometimes a turban. He rarely wears a pyjama, but contents himself with a *dhoti* or loin-cloth and a pair of country shoes. His clothes are dirty and his shoes patched and miry. His hair is unkempt and his chin shaggy. He keeps it so to please his immediate officers and to assume an air of humility. Tied up into a cloth-wrapped bundle are a few papers, a metal ink pot and a reed pen. This last he sometimes keeps hanging at his back or sticking behind one of his ears. This is the formidable weapon with which he builds and demolishes the permanent land records of the province.

The papers that he generally carries bundled under his arm are the register of the fields and grove lands situated in his jurisdiction. The carrying of these papers serves his purpose very well. If he goes on a visit, which he often does, to a village, the simple people of the locality gather round him and implore him to tell them the latest news of the zamindar or of the Government, which might be of interest to them. He at once puts on a serious face. "O, news!" says he, "quite a lot, and important news too." And he stops short there until after much cajolery he goes on: "But why should I tell you? You will not believe it, and I might find myself in difficulty for having divulged our zamindar's secret." When further pressed, and regaled with a jug of *sharbat* and refreshed by a few pulls at a *chillum* he begins to talk in an undertone to inspire confidence. "Well, our zamindar," says he,

"who is always outspoken to me, told me quite privately that he intended to give such and such fields to such and such man." Then he stops short again. The unfortunate man who held those fields is nonplussed and begins to entreat the Patwari to intervene and help him to retain the fields. The Patwari gets his opportunity. With much show of sympathy and with many soft words he promises to help the man and after pocketing the customary offering made to him takes his way home. This or any other similar tale he invents, which his mischievous mind is quite capable of. During seasons of scarcity or famine it is the Patwari who is constantly in demand. It is on his report and recommendation that rents are commuted or abated, and it is also on his recommendation that *taqavi* or agricultural loans are given. The phrase "the man on the spot" is more applicable to him than to the Collector of the district.

Only less varied than his moods are his duties. Both in lean and fat years, in deluge and drought, in times of peace and unrest he is indispensable. If an epidemic breaks out it is he who is to make a report about it. If there is a disturbance—social, political or religious—it is he who has to bring news of it to his immediate superiors. If there is any change, moral or material, in the village it is he again who has to inform the authorities. If the Commissioner or Deputy Commissioner or Tehsildar or Qanungo comes to the village on tour it is he who acts as their eyes and their ears. In the precincts of the court, in the office of the Tehsildar, at the residence of the zamindar and at the door of



the peasant it is he that is seen loitering more often than any other member of the village community. It is difficult, indeed, to say which of the two appellations—"Jack of all trades" or "maid of all work" is more befitting to the Patwari. At any rate it is hardly an exaggeration to say that compared with his pay and position he is an omnipotent person and being ubiquitous by the nature of his duties, he becomes also more or less omniscient. From his criticism nobody is safe; from his remarks nobody is free; he has few friends but a number of enemies. He is dreaded by all because as the Indian saying puts it, there is no cure for his bite. However he is a great personality and a great driving force.

There are two more figures in village society that require mention, and these are the Chaukidar and the spokesman of the village, called the Mukhiya. These are the two eyes of the Police Department. Take them away and the officers of law and order will grope in the dark.

First let us glance at the Chaukidar clad in his official dress, a dark blue shirt thinly bordered by red ribbon, with a red turban on his head. He bears in his hand a stout bamboo cudgel with a thick metal knob at one end. Whenever he passes through a village he assumes the airs of a superior man conscious of his position. His chief duty is that of an informant. He frequently visits the villages lying in his circle and supplies detailed information to the Police Sub-Inspector of all noteworthy incidents—criminal offences, minor and major, births and deaths, natural and suspicious, fights and feuds and similar local

occurrences capable of police colouring. He is also supposed to bring doubtful characters to the notice of his officer. If he has made several reports against a man that man becomes an eyesore to the police, and before long, rightly or wrongly, he finds himself in trouble. The Chaukidar also helps the Police in the investigation of any crime committed in the neighbourhood. During the course of investigation he is helpful in finding witnesses and such other matters. People are afraid of him and willingly give him a gratuity to escape from the irksome task of giving evidence in a criminal case; but even after receiving the gratuity he hauls them up before the magistrate to give evidence.

Let us now cast a glance at the Mukhiya. He has no official uniform, though he enjoys a recognised official position in the village hierarchy. His chief duty is to meet the Sub-Inspector of Police whenever he comes on a visit to the village, and to help him in the investigation of a crime. To echo every word of the Sub-Inspector, to make every arrangement for his comfort during his stay in the village, to supply witnesses, and to work as an intermediary are his chief functions. His influence is comparatively greater than that of common persons because he possesses the ears of the "thanedar saheb" and enjoys his good graces. In deciding petty matters he exercises his influence with some advantage to himself. On ceremonial occasions he can collect more milk and more fuel for his household than anybody else in the village. This is the only advantage he enjoys in an office that carries no salary but some responsibility.

### XXXIII.—VILLAGE PANCHAYATS.

Panchayats are a kind of council or assembly before which an offender against social custom is hauled up for trial. This ancient institution wields greater influence than modern courts of law. The only castes that do not fall within its jurisdiction are the Kshattriyas and the Brahmans; all other castes are subject to it. When a question relating to caste is at issue its verdict is final.

Every caste in India is divided into sections and sub-sections and it is quite natural, therefore, that dissensions should arise, and in order to settle them outside the court it was necessary to establish a popular assembly and to arm it with full powers. This was the origin of the Panchayat. Before the advent of the British in India the sentences passed by Panchayats upon offenders were exceedingly harsh or brutal. The offender was tied to the trunk of a tree and stripped of his cloth, and was whipped mercilessly. Sometimes his hands were tied up to the branch of a tree and his body swung to and fro until he confessed his guilt and consented to pay the penalty. Similar other punishments were remorselessly inflicted, but these are no longer in vogue as the law of the land does not countenance them. Although the severity of the punishments is gone the severity of the control still remains.

✓ The Panchayat is a small assembly, composed of a few men, each representing a circle, formed and agreed upon by the village people according

to some principle of their own. The members are called Panches and one of them, the oldest of the lot, is called the *Sar Panch* or president of the assembly. ✓

Suppose a man wishes to marry a widow. He is quite at liberty to do so. He is not required to obtain the permission of the assembly, but it is obligatory upon him to invite the assembly of his circle to a dinner. Until and unless he does this he will not be allowed to share any of his caste-fellows' *hookah* at a communal gathering. In their own parlance they call such an ostracism "*hookah band karna*." A person who is under this ban is looked down upon in society, and until the ban is removed he cannot marry his son or daughter. If he dare do so nobody will take part in the wedding and the other party to the contract will also find itself outcasted.

If a dinner is to be given the customary way of inviting the guests is to inform some principal member of the Panchayat and ask him to circulate the information to others. When the day fixed for the dinner arrives, money is borrowed and arrangements are made for the seating of the guests and for their meal. Meat and wine used once to be the two essential concomitants of such dinners, but nowadays both are excluded owing to their cost. A large white sheet is spread on the ground for the guests to sit on. The host with his sons receives them as they come one by one, and offers each a smoke at the common *hookah*. There is sometimes a *nautch* to entertain the guests both before and after dinner. The Kahars particularly stick to this old custom, but they

never allow a dance unless it is performed by some male member of the community. The dancer puts on female attire and dances in the style of dancing girls, but the more he tries to display his art the more unsightly the whole show becomes. The music accompanying the dance is produced by cymbals and a peculiarly made drum which makes a din and noise that sounds like melody only to the ears of the assembled guests. The songs sung are absolutely devoid of metrical flow and harmony. It is difficult to understand them and still more difficult to imitate or reproduce them. As soon as the dinner is served the party go into the house and each guest sits on a small wooden board. The number of guests is generally not large. Rice, curry, potatoes and a spoonful of ghee is all that is served before them.

If the dinner is what is called "*pucca khana*" which implies the absence of rice and curry, well, it can be taken anywhere and not necessarily within the precincts of the cooking place. A *pucca* dinner, involving as it does the expenditure of a greater quantity of *ghee*, is more expensive but more appreciated.

The trial of the social offender takes place before the meal. He is subjected to a cross-examination by several of the guests. The poor fellow stands with folded arms beyond the outermost fringe of the sheet on which the members of the Panchayat are sitting and with all humility and submissiveness he gives replies to their questions. If the offender happens to be a woman the cross-examination is more detailed and is accompanied by suppressed smiles and humorous remarks. The

whole assembly has a right to put questions. Sometimes a number of questions are put by several persons simultaneously, and the poor culprit appears confused. When the cross-examination is over the members of the Panchayat hold a brief consultation and pronounce judgment. In the case of an old offender the penalty is heavy—a fine of Rs. 25 or Rs. 30 and in addition one dinner or two dinners (*kachcha and pucca*), as the court may determine. The money realized in fine is spent in purchasing big utensils and other necessary articles for the use of the Panchayat. The dinner serves to wash away the guilt of the accused completely, and he is thereafter re-admitted within the pale of his caste and allowed to share a fraternal meal and smoke from a common *hookah*.

Whatever might have been the motive of bringing the Panchayat into existence and whatever be the present practice it cannot be denied that Panchayats have done much to keep the people belonging to the lower strata of society within the bounds of law, order and morality. If these Panchayats were to extend the scope of their activities and penalize theft, burglary and other similar offences their utility would be more increased. At present a person released from jail has simply to give a dinner to be taken back into his caste. The penalty should be severer in order that a deterrent effect may be produced in the case of crimes and not only in that of social offences.

#### XXXIV.—SICKNESS AND DEATH.

The Indian villager naturally enjoys extraordinary good health, but if once his iron constitution gives way it is impossible for him to regain it. Those who have never known sickness suffer most if ever they fall ill. The general poverty of the village people, their insanitary surroundings, their poor food, their ceaseless toil, all tend to make the sufferings of sickness worse than usual. There is no such thing as proper medical aid available in the villages of India.

It is true that district board dispensaries have been started in some villages, but their utility in the prevention and mitigation of disease is practically *nil*. They are so few and so slenderly equipped that their existence is hardly felt. The doctors in charge are too often only raw youths with third-rate qualifications. As a rule the village people take no notice of their own ailments as long as they are able to do their daily work. They love their work because it brings them food. But when they are confined to bed—well, to depict the picture of that scene in its true colours is a painful task. The bed is only an apology for a bed. It is an ordinary string cot with a bamboo frame, supported on four rough-hewn logs of wood and creaking and quaking in every joint. There is no bedding except a torn straw mat, and no pillow but the patient's own folded arm placed under the head. For covering there is a thin cotton sheet or blanket, dirty, full of rents and tears, and of a size insufficient to

cover the whole body, so that the patient has to lie down with his legs gathered up. It is altogether a miserable condition of body as well as of mind. Incapacitated from work he feels more anguish than from his physical sufferings. If the disease happens to be of no serious nature he shakes it off quickly but if it is the reverse, he is doomed.

Now starvation stares him in the face. Generally when the body is weak the mind is doubly active, and in this state the fear of starvation assumes for him a deadly look. He takes the gloomiest view of the situation. He does not so much care for his recovery as for his dependants whom he will leave unprovided for. The more he thinks about these the more he melts into tears which course down his pale and haggard cheeks. This mental anguish combined with physical agony hastens the end. There is hardly any one to scare away the flies which pester him all day, gaining entrance into his mouth and nostrils and buzzing about his ears in a doleful strain. The first medicines tried are barks and leaves of trees or some of those herbs that are believed to be a panacea for all ills; but when these fail the services of some local physician are requisitioned, and he readily takes the case into his hands and makes it worse with his so-called treatment of the patient with drugs culled from his obsolete and obscure pharmacopœia. The patient imagines himself to be feeling better: his head throbs less violently under the plaster applied to it; his eyes burn less fiercely; his throat feels more moist; and he has a craving for food and a look of cheerfulness



betokening the return of health. But all these illusions disappear one by one in less than three days. Now the question of going to some dispensary is taken into consideration. Along with this question the more complex question of conveyance has to be solved. Where is this to come from? No conveyance is available on hire in the countryside, but can only be had on loan. There are several carts in the village, but all the oxen available are needed for work in the fields. Why should anybody interrupt his ploughing or pressing for the sake of a sick man? Why should the well-to-do people of the village not do this? Well, of the well-to-do people the less said the better. To the long list of the curses of wealth drawn up by the sages of the world, I should suggest two additions—unimaginativeness and want of sympathy. There are of course exceptions. If a man of the right disposition is appealed to he allows the sick man to have the use of his cart. And now he is carried to the hospital. He lies down in the cart with nothing to be used as bedding. If the weather happens to be hot the fierce sun scorches his face. Some member of the family walks by the side of the cart which jolts along on its way, passing along tracks full of deep ruts and big holes. The driver, who always takes delight in urging his team to a racing pace, indulges in this pleasure now all the more keenly, knowing the load of the cart to be but the emaciated body of a sick peasant. The heavy jolting is torment to the patient. It is not seldom that a cart is upturned and the occupant is thrown out of it badly bruised,

or even sustaining severe fractures. However at last the destination is reached. At the dispensary sits the doctor, youthful in appearance, haughty in demeanour, saucy in temper, aristocratic in bearing. He is surrounded by a crowd. It is a difficult task to elbow a way through to him. He is engaged in conversation with those patients who can afford to pay a fee for his private calls. He goes on talking endlessly. What does he care for the poor patient in the cart? What difference does it make to him if a case is urgent? If anybody is bold enough to invite his attention to the seriousness of his case he suffers for it. He is kept waiting longer than anybody else, and sometimes to the last minutes of the dispensary hours. "What is the use of worrying about a case when medical science has established the fact that a disease must take its course?" This is what the doctor is frequently heard saying, and he repeats this often with a certain pride. He arrogates to himself the style of the father of medical science. He entirely forgets that if any science is perfect in this imperfect world it is the science of sympathy.

The practitioner has one more motive for keeping the crowd of patients waiting, and that is that if a higher authority happens to pass that way he may be impressed by the popularity both of the doctor and the dispensary.

Now at last the doctor begins his work. "What are you suffering from?" angrily demands he of one man. "Fever," meekly answers the patient. "What is your name?" is the next question. The patient tells his name, which is written down in a book, but in such a way that it

is difficult for the doctor himself to read it correctly the next day. "Mixture No. 1," he roars out, and the prescription is ready. If any question is put to him about diet, etc., either it is not answered or is answered with indifference between the queries and answers of other patients. Now the turn comes of a second patient. If he is limping owing to a boil which is not exposed to view, the doctor advises him tauntingly to betake himself to some big doctor, for his limping was due to dislocation of the hip bone. An opinion is formed and advice given before he has even seen what the matter is. A third patient, if he complains about a toothache, is told to wait, for surgical cases are taken up later. When all the minor work is done the doctor turns his attention to this dental case. Picture to yourself a man who, owing to swelling of the jaws, can hardly open his mouth from which saliva is freely flowing, and the doctor rudely trying to force it open as wide as he can, and the man howling like a wolf with pain. Now the doctor takes up a rusty dental instrument to extract the tooth. He does not know how to handle it properly and he tries it this way and that and up and down, the patient struggling all the while to free himself from the doctor's clutches, and neutralizing the doctor's force by making simultaneous movements in the direction of his pulls. Whenever the doctor gives an upward pull the man rises on his legs and the doctor has to give a downward jerk and the man sits down on the ground again. This sitting down and standing up goes on long, and the tooth refuses to yield to these unscientific and unmethodical jerks. The man

keeps on howling more and more and begs the doctor to give up his attempt. But the doctor whose successive failures had provoked smiles among the spectators becomes obstinate. One last effort he makes applying all the strength of which his wrist is capable, and out comes the tooth. The patient almost faints and the doctor, with proud eyes, looks towards the spectators for applause.

At last the doctor turns to our patient. He is conducted to the place where the cart is standing and makes a general survey. He puts the same questions as before and comes to the same hasty conclusion, and prescribes a medicine by quoting only its number on the dispensary list. The prescription is hurriedly dispensed and the cart rumbles on its way back. Now what is the medicine that has been supplied to the sufferer in return for all the inconvenience and discomfort that he has endured? It is some old drug which has lost almost all its efficacy by lying on the shelves for years. Its only recommendation is its cheapness, for which reason it is purchased by the district board who unfortunately believe that money spent on expensive drugs is thrown away. Dispensaries do not get even one-tenth of their real requirements. When there is a deficit budget in any district board the first item that is brought under the "axe" is the "Medical Department." What wonder is there then if the village folk do not appear enthusiastic about adopting modern methods of treatment? For the same reasons the new travelling dispensaries have not yet made satisfactory headway in the villages.

On returning home the patient finds himself much worse than when he started for the dispensary. Even if the medicine did him good he could not afford to go to the dispensary daily to get his case watched or his mixture repeated. The question of conveyance would not have been the only obstacle. He is confronted with a dilemma—either he must give up the treatment or go daily to the dispensary. Both these courses appear to be impossible. A middle course is adopted. The prescription is daily sent to the doctor to make such alterations and additions as he may think necessary after hearing the report of the case. But each time the messenger appears before the doctor his report is forestalled by the prescription, "Repeat the mixture." Meanwhile for lack of proper nourishment and peace of mind the patient is languishing. When after a few days lingering all hopes of recovery are given up, the dying man is made to lie down on the ground with his head towards the north. When he begins to gasp for breath a very small piece of gold, a few drops of Ganges water and a few leaves of the *tulsi* plant are put into his mouth. It is believed that these things make the dying man free from the cycle of births and make him attain Nirvana, which is the highest goal of Hindu philosophy. But in cases in which gold and Ganges water are not available *tulsi* leaves and pure water answer the purpose. This is one of the reasons, in addition to the medicinal virtues of *tulsi* leaves, why the plant is grown and tended in almost every Hindu home. There is one more essential ceremony. The tail of a cow is placed in the right hand of the dying

man, and the village priest, after reciting some *mantras* in Sanskrit, leads the cow away. Thus is performed in ritual form the gift of a cow, which is the most meritorious gift that a Hindu can make. The *mantras* of the village priest are neither articulate nor audible, nor are they even apt to the occasion, for he knows only a few of them, which he recites in a mumbling tone with slight variations on every occasion of rejoicing or mourning. It is further believed that the gift of a cow helps a dying man to swim across a great river which is supposed to separate the present world from the next.

Sometimes in the very midst of these ceremonies, sometimes just after, all is over with the man. If the dead man was not too old to earn bread for the family there is a genuine feeling of grief for him, but if he was a burden on the limited resources of the house, well—everybody styles himself a fatalist, and the display of grief is only formal. The women of the house play their part well. Their free flow of tears, their loud cries and wild lamentations make the scene pathetic. Now the first question that arises is that of cremation. The idea of burying the dead is only taken into consideration when no arrangement can be made for fuel. Where is dry fuel to be found? Nobody will give it, because it is superstitiously believed that to supply wood on such an occasion is to invite death to the house. Newly chopped wood will not do. Fuel is not sold in the villages. Some of these old ideas have now undergone change. A man is sent in hot haste to a cloth merchant in some neighbouring village to buy a piece of cloth for a shroud. When this is brought the dead body

is wrapped in it and placed on two long poles joined together by a strong network of bamboo rods, and the dead body is thus carried to the cremation ground, the bier being borne on the shoulders of four bearers who are generally the nearest relatives of the deceased, except the one that will perform the ceremony of cremation. The bearers of the dead body chant the name of "Ram Chandra" in a solemn manner all along the route. "*Ram nam sattya hai*" is the invariable chant, sung in a loud chorus. When the cremation ground is reached a funeral pile is made up. It is a pile made of dry faggots supported by four poles on each side and at the head and foot, so that during the course of burning the dead body may not drop down if any faggot happens to slip off. When the fire of the pile wanes clarified butter is sprinkled over it to make it ablaze again. The pile, fanned by the wind,—for the cremation ground is generally on the bank of a river where some breeze is always to be met—consumes the dead body in a very short time, but there is a very painful duty which the son has to perform, and from which there is no escape. The son has to give a slight poking stroke with a bamboo rod when the head is almost burned. In the absence of a son this is done by some other relative who performs the cremation ceremony. So much religious importance is attached to this ceremony that for the performance of it, if there is no son, a Hindu bewails his fate all through his life. When the cremation is over the funeral party returns home. Before going into the house they take their bath. The

women, too, have to take their bath outside the house. The man who performs the ceremony of cremation is not allowed to wear shoes and cannot take anything but the simplest vegetarian food cooked only by the female members of the family. In the evening an earthen lamp is lighted at the foot of a *peepul* tree and a jar full of water is suspended from one of its branches. If the deceased has left behind a young widow, hers is the hardest lot. Her sorrow can be better imagined than put into words. She is abused and cursed by every one in the house even by the menials of the village. Even those who come on visits of condolence show no sympathy to the widow. Her bangles are taken off, and her vermillion streak wiped out, and this breaks her heart, for these are the two things that were the living tokens of her married life. To a Hindu woman widowhood is the cruellest curse.

On the tenth day of the death the male members of the family have to get themselves shaved clean. A round of ceremonies is gone through, and the personal effects of the deceased and other articles are given away to a Brahman, a particular class of Brahman who specializes in taking gifts of this kind. Brahmans and the relatives of the family who come on a visit of condolence, are feasted in such style as circumstances permit. In the end time takes away the poignancy of sorrow and everything is forgotten.